BRITAIN'S BEST-SELLING MOUNTAIN BIKE MAGAZINE

Mountain Biking UK®

MARCH 2015
ISSUE 313



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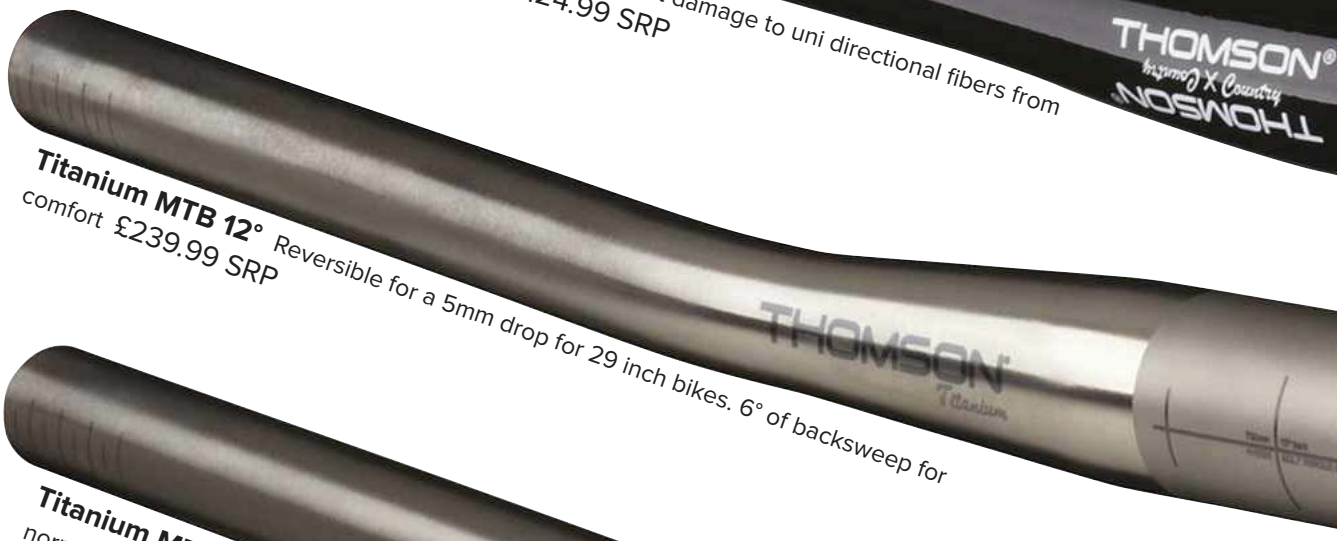
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Young, gifted and on the attack – Manon Carpenter and Tahnée Seagrave are an inspiration to us all





* Pull-out maps not available to overseas readers

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The riders inspiring the next generation



One of the big factors behind growth and interest in any sport is success at the top level. And when it comes to mountain biking – and more specifically women's downhill racing – the Brits have got it by the bucketload. Look no further than our cover star Manon Carpenter, who was 2014 world champion and World Cup champion, and Tahneé Seagrave, who came third at the same World Champs (behind fellow Brit Rachel Atherton). These are the riders who are inspiring us all at the moment. It doesn't matter whether you're old or young, male or female – it's all-encompassing. They're young, exciting, uber-talented and, as we found out when we spent some time with them on the slatey slopes of Antur Stiniog in North Wales, remarkably well grounded too. Turn to page 62 to see them in action and find out what words of wisdom they can offer you. And as if that weren't enough, Manon's coach from 2014, Alan Milway, has given us a load of top ways to ride your way to a higher level of fitness (pg 136) – so you can go further and faster for longer when those warmer months arrive!



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Danny Walter *MBUK* Editor



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Out Front

THE **FIVE STORIES** LEADING THE WAY THIS MONTH

Brits abroad

THERE'S A LONG tradition of UK racers heading abroad in the off season in search of fresh trails and winter sun, but this year it's not California or Spain that's on everyone's lips but New Zealand. The Kiwis have the terrain, the weather and the laidback lifestyle – and in a few weeks they'll be hosting their own version of the Crankworx freeride festival too. With more Brits than ever making the seasonal migration – including our very own Jake Ireland – the only danger is that the locals may get fed up with us beating them in their own backyard!

At round one of the New Zealand Mountain Bike Cup in Cardrona, a ski resort high in the mountains between Wanaka and Queenstown, a handful of visiting Brits lined up alongside local pinners like Brook MacDonald, George Brannigan and the Masters brothers. After the dust settled, it was last issue's cover star Greg Williamson who took the win in the Elite men's race, with fellow Brit Katy Curd the top woman and their countryman Bernard Kerr rounding things off nicely by winning the hotly-contested whip-off contest. It looks like we could be in for another stormer of a year, with British riders once more leading the charge at the World Cups...

Photo: Sven Martin

Maximum off-road mileage

WANT A RIDE you can really sink your teeth into? The Sandstone Way is a new 120-mile route linking the Northumbrian towns of Berwick-upon-Tweed and Hexham that aims to give riders as much off-road time as possible.

Made up of a mix of singletrack, doubletrack, unsurfaced lanes, bridleways and the odd quiet country road, it's designed to appeal to mountain bikers of all abilities, from families to riders wanting an all-day epic. It still represents a significant challenge though, with most people taking three to four days to get from one end to the other. Of course, we're sure the odd masochist will try to complete the whole lot in one go.

The route passes through an ever-changing landscape rich in history and geology, taking in the Simonside Ridge and other iconic sights of the Northumberland National Park. It's clearly waymarked, with more challenging alternatives to the main route highlighted in places and 10 optional loops for day riders.

All in all, the Sandstone Way looks like a great opportunity to get out and get off-road with your mates for a few days of epic riding and stunning scenery. It officially opens in spring 2015. For more information, head to **bit.ly/1CwCmww**.





TOO MUCH TECH

Time to take a step back?

THERE'S NO GETTING away from the fact that technological advances have not only transformed the way our bikes look, but also where and how we're able to ride them. From suspension and tubeless tyre systems to carbon frames and dropper posts, today's bikes are on another level.

The downside of this rapid and relentless progress is that it can be bewildering for the people who really matter – those of us who actually buy and ride mountain bikes. With new through-axle 'standards' on the horizon, we could be in for yet more 'advances' that'll make the bikes we're happy with today that little bit more out of date and potentially less valuable tomorrow.

With many riders still confused as to why they need to throw away their front derailleur or get bigger wheels, and given that these improvements often result in marginal gains, the question is, is this obsession with new tech clouding what mountain biking is all about? Surely our bikes are just tools to help us get out into the back of beyond, get fitter, challenge ourselves and have fun in the hills with like-minded souls?

New tech has always been a big part of mountain biking, but now and again it's good to take a quick break and just focus on riding. After all, you don't need the latest kit to have a blast on two wheels. Bikes may be that little bit lighter, faster and easier to ride than ever before, but what's the point if we're too busy obsessing over new gear to enjoy the ride?

The next big thing from France

HAILING FROM THE spa town of Evian in northern France, 20-year-old shredder Vincent Tupin, affectionately known as 'Vinny T', is a rider about to break into the big time. Combining the speed and style of a big-mountain freerider with the trick repertoire of a slopestyle rider, his skills on a bike earned him plenty of video views in 2014 and got him invited to some of the biggest events of the year.

"The Châtel Bike Festival, Nico Vink's Fest Series stop in Malmedy, Belgium, and my Whistler trip have to be the standout moments of 2014," says Vinny. "Of all of these, Nico's event sits above the rest. I guinea-pigged the first double in the line, which, at 21m, was without a doubt the biggest jump I've hit in my life!"

This could be a big year for Vinny, but with a mature head on his shoulders, he's got his priorities in order. "I'm looking forward to having another good season!" he says. "I want to keep filming with Gaëtan Rey and the ShapeRideShoot crew, keep building new spots, and to just keep riding with my friends. I hope to keep progressing and to go to more Fest Series events!"

If you want to see why we think Vinny is the next big thing, head over to the *MBUK* blog on *BikeRadar*.

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DEBUT DAMPER

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IT'S RARE TO see a coil-sprung shock on anything but a DH bike these days, with most riders using lighter and more easily adjustable air shocks. EXT hope to change this with the STORIA, which is aimed squarely at the enduro market. Along with the ARMA downhill shock, which shares similar internals, it was developed by Franco Fratten, an Italian motorsport suspension guru, and Dave Garland, mechanic for the Giant Factory Off-Road Team and owner of UK suspension tuners Stendec.

Key features include a low-pressure piggyback chamber, which helps minimise the force needed to get the shock moving, and a high oil flow rate, aimed at preventing hysteresis – the damping lag that occurs when a shock switches between the compression and rebound phases. EXT say this allows them to capitalise on the coil shock's inherent small-bump sensitivity.

The compression tune has been designed to firm up towards the end of the travel, compensating for the linear spring and preventing a harsh bottom-out. So effective is this that in place of the usual large rubber bump-stop, EXT fit one that's just 4mm thick. The three-way adjustable damping (high- and low-speed compression, plus rebound) is designed to be intuitive to dial in, and the purchase price includes a bespoke base tune tailored to your bike, wheel size, weight and riding style. Each STORIA comes with three different weight "superalloy" springs so you can fine tune your spring rate. Mounting hardware and a first service are also included. That price doesn't look so bad right now, eh?

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- Small diameter 29.5mm



DSP Grips SRP £21.99

DSP (DuraSoft Polymer) is the next generation in grip technology providing riders with an unmatched levels of comfort, control and responsiveness. These grips have been rigorously tested on the world cup circuit and by our elite freeriders.

- 130mm in length
- 27 grams (30.3mm) / 30 grams (32.3mm)
- 2 thicknesses (30.3mm & 32.3mm installed)



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The MBUK Pulse

MOUNTAIN BIKING THAT MAKES YOU FEEL ALIVE

FEATURING



26 AFGHANIS-DAN
Milner's scariest moments



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26in vs 650b vs 29in



36 BIKING APPS
Tools for your phone

"You need to add this trail to your bucket list" Big Ride – pg 146

Photo: Sam Needham

The snow show

You don't need skis to enjoy some seasonal shredding

There's nothing quite like snow to bring out the inner child in you. The white stuff may be cold and wet but it works like a tractor beam to lure you outdoors and have fun. And the best bit is, you don't need any special kit to enjoy it!

Riding bikes in the white stuff definitely brings its own challenges – it's hard to stay on line when you can't see the trail and it's probably not the time to head out on an all-day epic. But there's nothing quite like that feeling of cutting the first line through some fresh snow or using a well-timed skid to send a shower of icy powder down your mates' necks! The regular trail loop that's grown tiresome now keeps you on your toes, and dull scenery is transformed into a feast for the eyeballs.

It's not just us having a blast in the snow either. If fatbike racing is one extreme of snow riding (you can see how Matt and Tom are getting on with preparations for their Arctic challenge on page 80) then the annual White Style slopestyle contest in Austria is the other, with riders soaring off huge snow kickers in front of a baying crowd. Mountain bikes may not be designed for snow, but that doesn't mean we can't have a real blast in it.



TALES FROM THE FRONT LINE

Afghanis-Dan!

No stranger to danger, 'Dangerous' Dan Milner is a photographer who takes shooting dangerous mountain biking to dangerous new danger levels. Here are just some of the pickles he's found himself in...



When nature attacks!
Glen Coe, Scotland

"I got headbutted by a stag once. It was brilliant, possibly my finest moment. We'd just finished shooting, we saw a stag by the side of the road, I jumped out of the car and was too lazy to change lenses. I needed to get in close... Wallop! In the face! The camera took most of it but I cut my nose. I got away with it but it was quite close."



Shooting Matt Hunter,
Afghanistan

"The Wakan Corridor is a massive area that very few outsiders enter, but you just have to keep your wits about you. It's not much different to going out for a curry in Bedford on a Friday night... The danger in Afghanistan came more from the danger of falling into a great big churning river or being run off the road."



Taking on/hiding from the Taliban,
Afghanistan

"We stopped on the way out of Afghanistan in a small village and talked with some Afghans and found out that the Taliban were only three hours away. I asked one of the guides what would've happened if we'd mistakenly arrived at one of their checkpoints and he said we'd have been taken out and shot, simple as that. But if you're going to be scared of everything, then you'll never go anywhere."



Danger Airlines,
Nepal

"Nepal was a mental place. We were riding in the same area that was in the freeride movie *Where The Trail Ends*. We were only the second group of westerners to go in there with bikes. That was scary because the planes up there, the little 20-seater jobs, crash about twice a year. It was a 12-day ride back out."

AZ OF MOUNTAIN BIKING

C Champéry

This small resort in the Swiss Alps has hosted some of the most memorable races of recent years and its legendarily steep DH track is a place of pilgrimage for any serious downhiller.

AZ Champéry's downhill track is known for its sheer steepness, but it's also tight, technical and seriously gnarly. We know experienced DH racers who've struggled to make it down and some of the jumps really are bonkers. It's so hard to ride, especially in the wet, that it just keeps riders coming back for more.

AZ First used as a World Cup venue in 2007, Champéry quickly gained a huge amount of love and respect from the racers. Matti Lehikoinen won the debut event, but it's remembered more for Sam Hill's incredible second place run after the heavens opened.

AZ Word quickly got out about the amazing track and the World Championships were held there in 2011. Danny Hart took an epic win in the wet and wild men's race, even risking throwing in a trademark whip within sight of the finish line.

AZ The Champéry 4X track was a big success too, and there are also some less steep singletrack descents that take a more sedate route down the same hillside, so even mere mortals can make it back to the resort in one piece!

AZ Because Champéry is part of the Portes du Soleil region, it can be accessed by lift (and plenty of pedalling) from the French MTB hot-spots of Les Gets and Morzine. Be warned though, it's a fair old ride, so we wouldn't take a downhill bike!



Ask the experts

#8 HOW CAN I STAY IN SHAPE OVER WINTER?

It's easy to lose a bit of shape during the colder months but with good planning and a bit of effort you'll reap the rewards of some winter training come springtime and be able to ride better for longer.



1

Mix things up

Cross training can give you a break from long wet rides and keep things fresh. Gym work can be easily tailored for building riding strength – all the basic exercises like squats, lunges and ab work will help. Road bikes and motocross offer a different type of challenge.



2

Keep things fun

Trying to train every time you ride can suck all the fun out of it, so make sure to mix in some social rides with your mates too. Training rides don't have to be serious though – maybe include some sprints and timed downhill runs to get your heart rate racing.



3

Put in the hours

If you want to improve your riding, there's no replacement for spending more time on your bike. Include some long distance, mellow paced rides to improve stamina and burn fat. There's not much point improving power if the weight is working against you.



About the expert Neil Donoghue is the 2014 UK Gravity Enduro champion, a professional mountain bike coach and ex-World Cup downhiller. With 19 years' racing experience and five years as a coach, he knows small changes can make a big difference.

MBUK PRO'S EYE VIEW



INNES GRAHAM

WORLD CUP DOWNHILL RACER

"Back in 2008 all the DH riders were like superstars to me and I had pages ripped out of magazines plastering my walls. If someone had told me that in five years' time I'd race my first World Cup, I'd never have believed them! At that point I rode sketchy jumps and tracks that I built with my friends, but it was never more than just riding bikes and hanging out.

When I signed with the MS Mondraker Team in 2013 I was just 16 and still highly dependent on my family. To say I was nervous and scared would be an understatement, but I was living the dream. It was the biggest learning curve of my life. Racing hasn't just taught me how to ride down a mountain as fast as possible, it's also forced me to grow up. Fast-forward two years and I'm now familiar with all the main airports throughout Europe and at ease in almost all the surroundings I can find myself in.

"PEOPLE I HAVE POSTERS OF ON MY WALL ARE NOW MY TEAMMATES!

Going into 2015, it's crazy to think that people I have posters of on my wall aren't just heroes of mine but are also now my teammates. Danny Hart, one of the biggest names in DH racing, and Emmeline Ragot, one of the very top female athletes, have joined the MS Mondraker Team. I'm in the best place possible to continue learning and growing as a rider, and I can't wait to see where my bike will take me next!

THE BEST OF...

LUDLOW

Shropshire's renowned gastro hotspot is also home to a well-established MTB scene, with regular races being held in the surrounding countryside since the early Nineties thanks to the unwavering commitment of local shop Pearce Cycles, who sold out an entire downhill series in only four hours in 2014.





THE LOCAL

After 25 years racing everything from DH to 24-hour solo XC, local shredder **Ian Thomas** has finally achieved his dream and bought a house next to his favourite trails in Mortimer Forest on the outskirts of Ludlow. When he's not working on Formula 1 race cars, he spends his time digging trails and smashing turns.

ACCOMMODATION

The Mount (www.mountguesthouse.com) is a great B&B in Ludlow with en suite rooms, secure bike storage and washing and drying facilities. If you want to get even closer to the trails, Monstay Farm (http://monstayfarm.co.uk) is perfectly located on the road separating Mortimer Forest and Bringewood and has space for tents, caravans and motorhomes.

TRAILS

With old-school racing venues like Mortimer Forest and Bringewood literally on its doorstep, Ludlow has a wealth of riding within spitting distance of the town centre, catering for all disciplines. Pearce Cycles (www.pearcecycles.co.uk) run hugely popular downhill and enduro events should you wish to unleash your competitive side.

ENTERTAINMENT

Ludlow's lowkey nightlife revolves around a number of quality pubs in the town centre that sell beers from local breweries – Hobsons is the local favourite. The Church Inn (www.thechurchinnludlow.com) is a good starting point, while the wine bar at Chang Thai (www.thailudlow.co.uk) is a little more contemporary, with cocktails and continental beers.

FOOD

You're spoiled for choice in Ludlow, with excellent pub food at The Queens (www.thequeensludlow.com) in Lower Galdeford or, if you fancy going a little more upmarket, Bistro 7 in Corve Street, which offers excellent value and superb grub. Vaughans sandwich shop in King Street is legendary among locals for its hot pork rolls and makes a perfect lunchtime refuelling stop.

The **Full Service.**

Chain Reaction cycles.com



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CRC Best Price Guarantee **- Free UK Delivery** on all orders over £9 **- Free 365** day returns collect+ parcels made easy

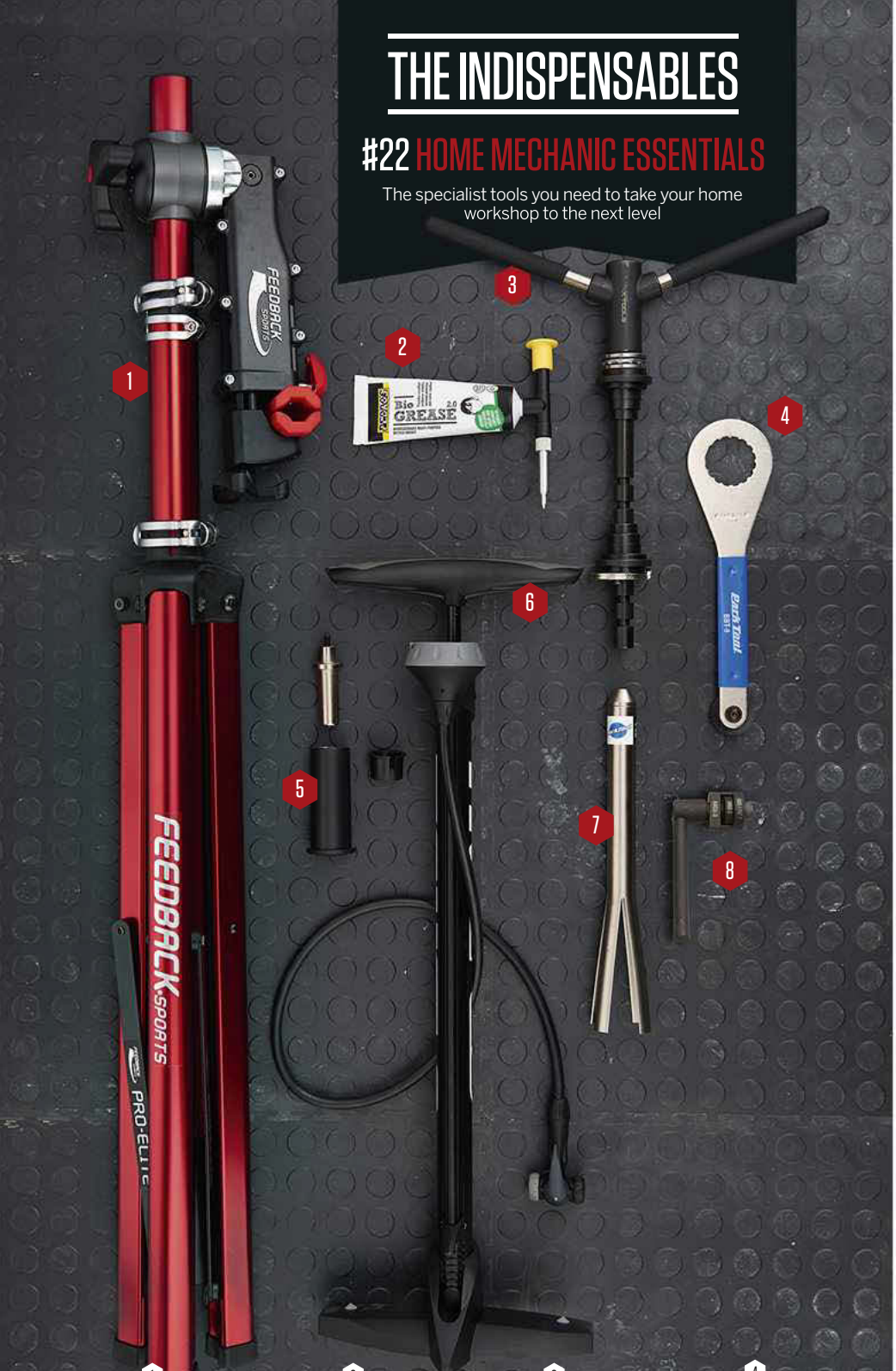
Join our community for the latest updates, news, giveaways and cycle chat...


A LONG WAY
FROM HOME IS
NO PLACE TO BE
CAUGHT OUT
Many riders use our bikes to go far off into the wilds.
And that's why we build them to come back.
ONE PIVOT, SIMPLY RELIABLE
Orange
MOUNTAIN BIKES
five | alpine160 | SEGMENT | Alpine five
THE ALL-MOUNTAIN AND TRAIL BIKE CONCEPT FROM ORANGE — "IT JUST WORKS"
27.5
29
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THE INDISPENSABLES

#22 HOME MECHANIC ESSENTIALS

The specialist tools you need to take your home workshop to the next level



1 WORKSTAND

If you plan on spending some quality time working on your bike, a proper stand gives you access to all the vital areas.

Feedback Pro-Elite workstand
£249.99 www.2pure.co.uk

2 GREASE GUN

Keeping things running smoothly without creaks and groans is that bit easier with some quality grease and a gun to apply it.

Pedro's Bio Grease (85g) and gun
£24.99 www.2pure.co.uk

3 HEADSET PRESS

With a good headset press that can double up as a press-fit BB press, you'll have two fewer reasons to rely on your local bike shop.

X-Tools headset press
£59.99 www.hotlines-uk.com

4 BB AND CRANK ARM TOOL

BBs are prone to creaking. The good news is they love nothing more than being regularly removed, cleaned, regreased and reinstalled.

Park Tool BBT-9
£19.99 www.madison.co.uk

5 STAR NUT PRESS

We can't be the only ones who've cocked up the simple job of installing a new star nut. Get it right first time with one of these.

X-Tools star nut installer
£13 www.hotlines-uk.com

6 TRACK PUMP

A good floor pump makes inflating tyres a lot quicker and easier, and is pretty much essential if you want to go tubeless.

Truflo Maxtrax 3 track pump
£34.99 www.madison.co.uk

7 HEADSET REMOVER

A hammer and screwdriver will get the job done, but you risk making a mess of your headset cups or the inside of your head tube.

Park Tool RT-2
£39.99 www.madison.co.uk

8 BEARING PRESS

Removing worn suspension pivot bearings can be a real operation for even the best mechanics without the right tools.

Superstar bearing tool £17.99
www.superstarcomponents.com

KNOW YOUR BIKE

UNLOCKING THE TECHNICAL JARGON TO EXPLAIN HOW OUR BIKES WORK

WHEEL SIZES



29in

The biggest advantage of 'wagon wheels' is their ability to roll over challenging terrain and carry speed regardless of the conditions. On the flip side, these large hoops are slow to accelerate, inherently more prone to flex and difficult to fit into longer-travel frames. They're popular with cross-country riders.

650b

These 'in-betweener' hoops have superseded the previous 26in standard in a little over two years. Often referred to as 27.5in – though the tyre diameter tends to be closer to 27in – they lack the out-and-out advantages of 29in wheels but also avoid many of the downsides, making them the perfect size for many trail, enduro and downhill riders.

26in

Thanks to the meteoric rise of the marginally larger – and therefore faster rolling and grippier – 650b size, the good old 26in wheel has lost its hold on the market. But all is not lost. These smaller wheels are tougher and quicker off the mark than the bigger options, so they remain popular with dirt jumpers and some downhillers.

The Pulse



THANK GOD FOR...

TECHNICAL FABRICS

IF YOU'VE EVER been on a long sweaty ride in a T-shirt you'll know where we're coming from straight away. Technical materials aren't just to be thanked for keeping us warm and dry in winter, they save us from becoming a hot, sweaty mess on summer days too.

Insanely breathable waterproof fabrics (Gore-Tex Active, eVent, Polartec NeoShell, Nikwax Analogy) and windproof layers (Gore Windstopper, Pertex) have changed winter riding for us Brits, making it possible to go for a ride and actually stay both dry and warm.

Even the jersey materials that we take for granted wick sweat away well and dry ridiculously fast too. Cotton T-shirts just don't cut it any more, and neither do modified motocross jerseys or roadie Lycra. Thankfully the latest technical kit looks great as well as having a serious purpose and function.

FLASHBACK

2000
TEAM ANIMAL ORANGE



A FORMER BMX and motocross racer who moved over to downhill after his parents bought a bike shop, Greg quickly made a name for himself in his native South Africa. The 18-year-old was picked up by UK-based Team Animal Orange for his first year of senior World Cup racing and bagged his first podium spot aboard an Orange 222, then a year later hit the big time when he won the series title.

THAT WAS THEN

THIS IS NOW!

#51 Greg Minnaar

2015
SANTA CRUZ SYNDICATE



RIDING FOR THE Santa Cruz Syndicate since 2008, Minnaar has always been Mr Consistent. Fifteen years since his first World Cup podium he's still a regular top 10 finisher and can never be ruled out of a win, taking the World Championships title three times, in 2003, 2012 and 2013. After spending most of 2014 recovering from injury, we're sure he'll be back with a vengeance this year.

FLASHBACK

CLASSIC MTB MOMENTS FROM THE PAGES OF MBUK

Going to the movies, 1997

In 1997 we went all out during the production of the now iconic *Chainspotting* movie, flying out to sunny California with Team MBUK, Rob Warner, Martyn Ashton and Martin Hawyes to meet up with Steve Peat, Mike King and Hans Rey. The dry trails and awesome weather delivered some great footage, though Andrew Titley jumping off the hotel roof into the pool stole the show.



RIPS DOWN THE MOUNTAIN

TEARING UP THE RULEBOOK ON THE WAY

The Cannondale Jekyll is two bikes in one: 160mm of boulder bouncing trail crushing bruiser, burly enough to take on and beat the downhill bikes at the 2014 Mammoth Mountain Kamikaze Pro GRT race under enduro rider Marco Osborne's control.

At the flick of a switch, the Jekyll has 95mm of travel and adjusted geometry for that climb back to the top to beat them all down again...



Model shown: Jekyll Carbon Team - £5,299.99 RRP

CHECK OUT CANNONDALE.COM/OVERMOUNTAIN

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unique

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OVER UNCOMFORTABLE TERRAIN

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Photo: Simon Nieborak

LIVING THE DREAM

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FROM THOSE WHO'VE SUCCESSFULLY TURNED MOUNTAIN BIKING INTO MORE THAN JUST A HOBBY

Hannah Myers
Founder
Flare Clothing Co.

Like many of her peers, Hannah Myers' first port of entry into the bike business was a job in a bike shop. A taste for mountain biking and distaste for most women's riding gear convinced her to grab the bull by the horns and use her degree in product design to start her own clothing business. She tells us how she went about it...

It all started while I was working at the bike shop. I was riding more and more but was always really dissatisfied with the clothing options available for women. I wanted something that fitted properly and would perform how I wanted it to, as well as look cool. I knew I could either sit back and wait for something to come along or I could do something about it!

From colours to fonts and graphics, Flare products look different and stand out from the crowd. This is down to a combination of things. Coming from a product design background as opposed to an action sports one gives me a different perspective. I'm also a member of the user group I'm designing for, which gives me good insight as well as a great feeling when I'm on the right track with a new design. A lot of the inspirations I have for new designs and collections have come from fashion trend forecasting, as opposed to motocross or other extreme sports trends, which I hope gives a different and unexpected end product.

It hasn't been that easy to build the brand and get it off the ground. It's taken a lot of perseverance, but it's completely worth it. Manufacturing is always a bit of a challenge. In fact, one Monday in November 2013 I discovered I'd become a victim of fraud. It took a huge amount of drive to move on from that situation and find a solution, which I'd done by the following Wednesday.

I strive to make Flare clothing fit well – both in terms of comfort and being flattering – and be of a high-performance nature, as well as looking cool. Flare products are there to provide women with high quality riding kit that embraces their femininity without making any compromise on empowerment or awesomeness! All of our technical clothing is also proudly made in the UK, which was integral when starting the brand. Not only does this allow us to keep really tight control of all stages of the production process, but also it ensures fair working practices as well as contributing to the British heritage of manufacturing.

I'm really excited about 2015 – it's going to be a great year! For the girls, the 2015 collection is looking awesome. We've got a heavy-duty downhill range as

> "I wanted clothing that fitted properly and would perform how I wanted it to, as well as look cool"

well as a trail/enduro collection with some fantastic colours and graphics. We've also launched Flare Rider Co., which is a brother brand to Flare Clothing Co. using the same quality, made-in-the-UK manufacturing, innovative graphics, colours and fabrics, but made for the guys. We'll be supporting our new race team throughout the season at the UK Gravity Enduro and British Downhill Series races as well as at the World Cup in Fort William and the Tweedlove Enduro World Series round, so be sure to come check out the kit.

I think persistence has been the most valuable asset over the past year. It's incredibly important not to give up at the first hurdle – or the second! If you have a clear picture of what you're trying to achieve there'll always be a way around all the challenges that inevitably come up.

MBUK

RETAIL THERAPY

Phone apps

The smartphone app market is packed with more time-consuming distractions than ever before, but amid the quagmire are some useful additions to any rider's arsenal. Here are some of our favourites...



MAD SKILLS MOTOCROSS 2

Got some time to waste while you wait for your mates to turn up? The latest instalment of this MX game has got our team fired up with its big jumps and high speeds, and best of all, it's free to download.

www.madskillsmx.com
£Free Android, iOS

INSTAGRAM

With over 300 million users, Instagram is the easiest way to share your riding photos and videos with fellow bikers around the world. Follow us at **www.instagram.com/mbukmagazine** and don't forget to add the #mbuk tag to your posts!

www.instagram.com
£Free Android, iOS, Windows

BIKE DOCTOR

Covering everything from brake bleeding to truing buckled wheels, this app is your very own personal workshop assistant.

www.bikedoctorapp.com
£2.99 Android, iOS

VIEWRANGER

This handy app turns your phone into a fully fledged GPS unit, with turn-by-turn navigation even when there's no network coverage and the option to upgrade to Ordnance Survey mapping. You can download routes – including *MBUK*'s Big Rides – and share your adventures online.

www.viewranger.com
£Free (OS maps from £10)
Android, iOS

GOPRO

If you've got one of the newer, wi-fi enabled GoPros, you can use this app to make sure you've got the right camera angle, play back the action and share your videos and photos across the net. Other brands like Contour and Drift offer apps for their cameras too.

www.gopro.com
£Free Android, iOS, Windows

5 REASONS TO HIT THE FOREST OF DEAN

TRY OUT LATEST BIKES AT CHAIN REACTION DEMO DAY

Regular readers of *MBUK* will know how fond we are of the Forest of Dean. With Chain Reaction Cycles holding two demo days there in March, here's why it's a great place to go and try out some bikes:

1 TRAILS

With blue and red graded XC trails, uplifted DH runs littered with jumps and plenty of off-piste singletrack, the FoD has it all!



2 FACILITIES

The large car park, excellent cafe, well stocked bike shop, toilets, shower block and bike wash all make for an easy day on the trails.



3 UPLIFT

Too tired to pedal up or testing the latest DH bike? FlyUp Downhill's superb uplift service will pick you up and drop you off at the top.



4 LOCATION

On the Gloucestershire/ Monmouthshire border, the FoD is easily accessibly from the M4 and M5.



5 DEMO DAYS

Try the latest bikes from Ghost, Cube, Nukeproof and Vitus, plus there's a BBQ lunch, goody bag and free uplifts at the demo day.



The CRC MTB Demo Event takes place on the weekend of 14-15 March. Places are limited and will be allocated on a first come, first served basis. Registration costs £10 for a half day (9am-1pm or 1pm-5pm) or £15 for a full day (9am-5pm). To book, head to **bit.ly/1CqMnvl**.

ENDOMONDO
Helping you to train harder and better, this app allows you to track your workouts and provides audio feedback along the way, with the option to connect to friends and family for extra encouragement.

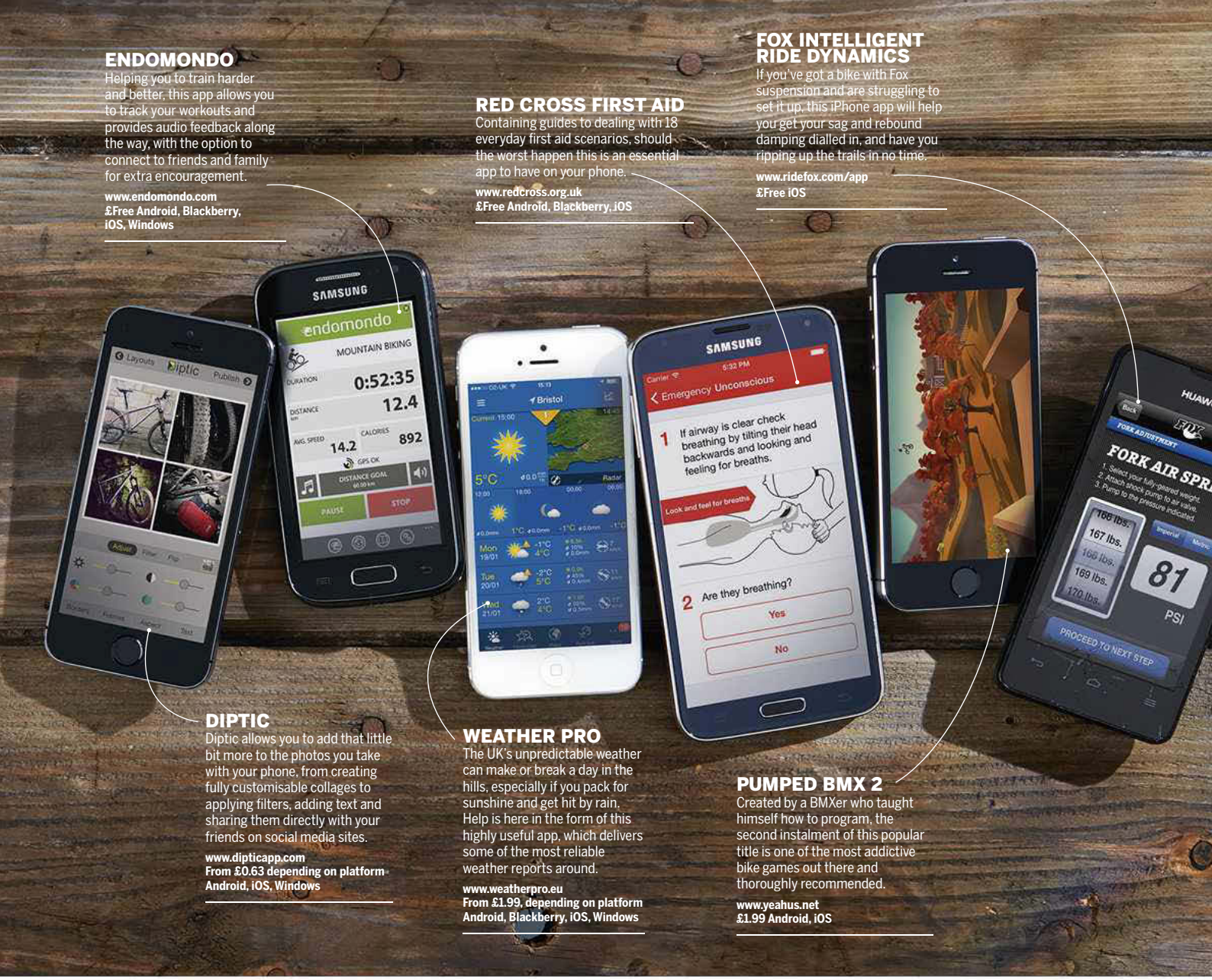
www.endomondo.com
£Free Android, Blackberry, iOS, Windows

RED CROSS FIRST AID
Containing guides to dealing with 18 everyday first aid scenarios, should the worst happen this is an essential app to have on your phone.

www.redcross.org.uk
£Free Android, Blackberry, iOS

FOX INTELLIGENT RIDE DYNAMICS
If you've got a bike with Fox suspension and are struggling to set it up, this iPhone app will help you get your sag and rebound damping dialled in, and have you ripping up the trails in no time.

www.ridefox.com/app
£Free iOS



DIPTIC
Diptic allows you to add that little bit more to the photos you take with your phone, from creating fully customisable collages to applying filters, adding text and sharing them directly with your friends on social media sites.

www.dipticapp.com
From £0.63 depending on platform
Android, iOS, Windows

WEATHER PRO
The UK's unpredictable weather can make or break a day in the hills, especially if you pack for sunshine and get hit by rain. Help is here in the form of this highly useful app, which delivers some of the most reliable weather reports around.

www.weatherpro.eu
From £1.99, depending on platform
Android, Blackberry, iOS, Windows

PUMPED BMX 2
Created by a BMXer who taught himself how to program, the second instalment of this popular title is one of the most addictive bike games out there and thoroughly recommended.

www.yeahus.net
£1.99 Android, iOS

INDUSTRY INSIDER

LUKE HONTZ

FIVE TEN'S MARKETING MANAGER



On the pulse
On a typical day I get up early and work on international business and then turn my attention to North America. Five Ten does business in 40 countries worldwide so there's always something interesting to address. It's fun because I work directly with athletes like Cam Zink, Jill Kintner, Greg Minnaar and Darren Berrecloth. It really keeps me in contact with what riders want.

Work meets play
The best thing about working at Five Ten is the ability to be around what we love every day. We ride, climb, hike and paddle. We're passionate about our sports! There are a lot of bikes in our California office and one of our favourite trails is the Hulder Crooks/Jedi trail in Redlands, a great ride to end the day. I live in the Tahoe area and ride a lot at the Northstar bike park too.

New kit
There have been some big changes in our product line this year. The new Impact VXi is a great performer, both in flat and clipless versions. Our design team spent a lot of time with athletes and the new Stealth Mi6 rubber really boosts performance, not to mention the clipless shoe is lighter than anything we've ever done. For winter 2015 we'll have the new Freerider Elements with a lace cover, and a Freerider High. The Elements will come in Phantom and S1 soled versions, and the Stealth Phantom rubber will be made with two-tone colours.

Expansion plans?
We're not in the bike jersey and shorts market, but we are working hard on our casual line. Let people who specialise in Lycra do what they do best and we'll do what we do best – making high-end footwear for the world's best athletes and most avid riders.

Celeb endorsements
We're really happy that one of the spectators was able to provide Gee Atherton with a pair of Five Ten shoes at the Cairns World Cup in 2014. It was a big compliment to have him wear our shoes. We ran an Instagram/Facebook contest to learn how it transpired and it took us only two-and-a-half hours to get the whole story!

Gee usually rides clipped in, but due to the water and mud he decided flats would be faster. He stopped by the course and two spectators offered him their shoes – they both had Five Tens. Gee picked a pair of Impacts.

We've also had Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible* and multiple contestants on *The Amazing Race* and *American Ninja Warrior* in our shoes. We've had athletes in lots of TV commercials too, and some who've done some pretty neat stunt work in movies like *Godzilla* and *Spiderman*.

The Pulse

FREE NEXT MONTH

ULTIMATE ALPINE RIDE GUIDE

If you're planning an alpine adventure this summer, you really won't want to miss this!

Covering 20 resorts, this year's *MBUK Ultimate Alpine Ride Guide* supplement is packed with everything you need to know about where to ride, what to take for your trip and how to pack it, as well as how to get your bike ready for the rigours of big mountain riding. We'll also show you how to maximise your holiday time and what to look out for during your travels. It's crammed with stunning photography to get you frothing at the mouth for endless singletrack, wild hucks and good times in some of the world's most amazing riding locations.



ON SALE 6 MARCH



2015 UCI WORLD CUP & WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

After an electric 2014 season, we're counting the weeks until the 2015 World Cup series kicks off. Here's where we'll be seeing our favourite XC and DH superstars doing their thing between April and September...



APRIL 11-12
DH #1, LOURDES, FRANCE
A new location for the World Cup, this Pyrenean track looks set to spice things up in a similar fashion to Méribel in 2014. One not to miss!

JUNE 6-7
DH #2, FORT WILLIAM, SCOTLAND
What can we say that hasn't already been said? The best riders in the world and 20,000 fans, all in the stunning Scottish Highlands... Nothing comes close.

MAY 23-24
XC #1, CZECH REPUBLIC
Situated smack bang in the centre of the Czech Republic, Nove Mesto is regularly voted the best XC venue on the circuit and is due to host the XC World Champs in 2016.

MAY 30-31
XC #2, ALBSTADT, GERMANY
Located in the south-west of Europe's biggest mountain biking nation, this is another popular venue that can be relied on to host some action-packed racing.

SEPTEMBER 1-6
UCI WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS, VALLNORD, ANDORRA
It's the biggest event of the year, and with Cedric Gracia's bar at the bottom of the steep and technical downhill track, this'll be a wild one, both on and off the mountain.

JUNE 13-14
DH #3, LEOGANG, AUSTRIA
Regarded by some as being too 'bike parky', Leogang's bermed corners make for one of the tightest races on the circuit and some nail-biting action come race day.

AUGUST 8-9
XC #5 & DH #6, WINDHAM, UNITED STATES
Upstate New York's quaint ski resort of Windham has proven to be a hit with racers and fans alike, and makes a welcome return for the 2015 season.

JULY 4-5
XC #3 & DH #4, LENZERHEIDE, SWITZERLAND
Another new venue for 2015, racers and fans will be greeted by huge mountains, epic landscapes and superb racing in Lenzerheide.

AUGUST 1-2
XC #4 & DH #5, MONT-SAINTE-ANNE, CANADA
There's been a World Cup (or World Champs) round in MSA every year since there's been a World Cup, and the downhill track in particular is still regarded as one of the toughest on the circuit.

AUGUST 22-23
XC #6 & DH #7, VAL DI SOLE, ITALY
The overall World Cup winners in both disciplines will be crowned in Val di Sole, known for one of the most savage downhill tracks on the circuit, which will undoubtedly catch a few off guard as they race for glory.

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★ MBUK STAR LETTER

Mountain biking is one of my greatest passions in life. Ever since I can remember I've been riding, doing jumps and usually falling off. I've had one or two serious crashes but nothing can keep me off two wheels. I'm sure most of your readers can relate to this.

Over the past few years I've fallen in love with trail/enduro riding – that feeling of darting through trees, blowing up berms and pedalling like a madman when a hill approaches. It's one of the most social sports in the world too – countless times I've been taking a breather or fixing a mechanical and ended up talking to a fellow rider I've never met before for half-an-hour plus.

The main reason I ride is to escape. When work/stress gets on top of me I jump on my bike. I'm sure you know what I'm on about – when you're buzzing down a trail you feel free. It clears my head, puts a massive grin on my face and allows me to vent any stress I've built up. Even if I can't ride for a few days, I can still think, "Yes, I can ride on Saturday!". For the few hours I ride for, I feel eight years old again, playing with my friends and seeing who can get to the bottom of the hill fastest, with not a care in the world.

ALYN PAWLIN, VIA EMAIL

Yep, there's nothing like mountain biking to make you feel like a kid again. In fact, certain MBUK staffers have spent so much time riding, they've never really grown up...



If your letter gets picked as the Star Letter, you'll receive a pair of DMR Vault pedals worth £99.99, courtesy of Upgrade (**www.upgradebikesco.uk**). For full *Mountain Biking UK* terms and conditions, see p14.

Faulty airbags

My name is Dan, I'm 31 and I suffer from an illness called cystic fibrosis, I won't bore you with the details but it affects my lungs greatly – a few months ago my old airbags were working at 40 per cent of what you'd expect of someone my age, and I have frequent hospital admissions too.

At the end of September a good friend decided to sell his Specialized Hardrock Sport Disc. I took it off his hands, with the aim to start mountain biking. Since then I've been doing casual road rides a couple of times a week, and as of the end of December my lungs had already improved to 50 per cent!

A couple of weeks ago I picked up my first issue of *MBUK*. I was delighted to find a beginners' section with info on bike maintenance, places to ride and those essential techniques (which I'm still trying to master). A friend is taking me to a local beginners' trail in a couple weeks, which I'm pretty excited about. I can't wait for summer, when my health will have improved further, and hopefully my skills too.

DAN ARGYLE, VIA EMAIL

It's great to hear the cycling's making such a difference, Dan. Just make sure you get off road soon – we wouldn't want you to join the Lycra-clad Dark Side...

Shift in thinking

While in hospital after a big operation, my mates clubbed together and bought me a dropper seatpost to encourage my speedy recovery. I'd always wanted one, having borrowed one for our last Afan trip and found it saved me going OTB numerous times. But if I was going to fit a dropper to my bike, I wanted to be able to get to the lever quickly (unlike at Afan, on normal XC trails there aren't signs telling you when to drop your seat) and my shifter was in the way.

Deciding that dropping my seat was more important than front shifting, I mounted my dropper lever on the underside of the left-hand side of the bar and bought a very cheap, old school, non-indexed down tube shifter, made a mounting block for it and fixed it to the underside of my stem. The system works a treat, giving instant access to the dropper post, a clutter-free handlebar and easy front gear changing – after all, front shifts are normally infrequent and planned.

SEAN SULLIVAN, VIA EMAIL

Well, it's not the most elegant system we've seen, and you could get a similar lever position without compromising your shifting by switching to a SRAM front shifter and using a Matchmaker clamp to integrate the two controls (or just go 1x10), but it's certainly ingenious! »

Sean reckons his stem-mounted shifter works a treat. Anyone else got a brilliant bodge to show us?



SOCIAL STUFF

@ MBUK FORUM
www.bikeradar.com/forums

Hardtail to full-sus – should I bite the bullet?

I could happily do all my local trails on a HT, but I just find FS bikes more fun to ride... which is why we do it, right? – **Citizen Lee**

Get one. I went FS not to do gnarly stuff but because by the end of a ride the relative children I ride with would still be hopping merrily over roots and ruts, and I'd be cursing each one – **cooldad**

There will be trade-offs with a FS. On longer uphill sections, with the added weight you may get more tired – **kester**

A lot will depend on the weight and geometry of the bike. It won't feel anything like your HT – **POAH**

FS is just plain more fun. Unless you're bedevilled with a Protestant work ethic, then why martyr yourself?
– **Angus Young**

I disagree. Riding an FS is like riding on mild sedatives – you can see the trail but you can't really feel what's going on!
– **Ferrais**

FACEBOOK

www.facebook.com/MBUKMag

Dream second bike?

Steve Peat's 2012 Leogang World Champs Santa Cruz V10
– **Steve Sjösten**

My guilty pleasure would be a fatbike – **Mick Theobald**

Another Orange Five, so I could have a choice of two Fives to ride! – **Mark Pulleyn**

A Yamaha WR250 to save me fecking pedalling!
– **Mick Sainsbury**

A Niner. They're just gorgeous
– **Dan Jacob**

A Whyte G-150 SCR – a UK built beast ready to take on anything! – **Jacob Garrod**

TWITTER

http://twitter.com/mbukmagazine

Which bike shops deserve some love?

Swinnerton Cycles at Cannock Chase – good advice, patient, great kit and good lads in the shop – @james_the_cad

MuddyBum Bikes for keeping it real and spreading the stoke – @unltdadventures

Cleveland Cycles, for always getting me out of trouble at the last minute – @picklemtb

Fulford Cycles in York are fantastic. Really helpful and friendly
– @RichardCammack1

JE James, Chesterfield. Great set of guys and sometimes you can get a coffee
– @PeakMB

Black8Bikes in Nailsworth, Cotswolds. Friendly, family run shop with amazing service. Shop rides around the local trails too – @L4W_15

Dirty habit

I just wanted to share with you my experiences of my first ever downhill race, thanks to MIJ Downhill at the Forest of Dean. I was really nervous because I'd never entered a proper race before, but the adrenaline took over on race day. The crowd cheering and clanging all the way down the track made it so worthwhile. I had a few practice runs after pushing up to the top, then got chatting to other competitors and realised they were all getting on the uplift at only £2 a go. D'oh! I put in a decent time on my first race run but overcooked it on the second. I think I was last in the Masters but I didn't care – it was unbelievable fun! I'm now hooked and will be entering as many races as I can next year.

ADAM GOODWIN, MERTHYR TYDFIL

Your first race can be intimidating, but nothing gets the heart pumping quite like the sound of those starting beeps! We reckon it's something every mountain biker ought to try at least once.

People are ace

It's hard to say "thank you" sometimes to people who really deserve it. You'd like to buy them a pint and share stories of rides and good times, but it's not always possible.

I didn't have the chance when I was carted off in an ambulance after breaking my collarbone and wrist at Dalby Forest last summer, or when I was picked up by the air ambulance last month at Grenoside Wood with fractured ribs and internal bleeding.

I'd like to say thank you to those guys from Manchester who called the air ambulance and made me comfortable at Grenoside, and to those chaps in the summer who put me in a sling and helped me out of Dixon's Hollow. I'm bouncing back, so to speak.

People are ace and it's comforting to know that when a tailwhip goes south or a drop doesn't come together, other riders will do their utmost to help. This is the real essence of community and it's awesome – and I hope that one day I'll get to buy you that pint!

MARK ALGAR, VIA EMAIL

If you helped Mark out, get in touch and we'll pass your details on to him. Just remember to save a place at the bar for us!

The small print

Email your letters and photos to **mbuk@bikeradar.com**.

- The 'Star Photo' winner will receive a Lezyne CNC Dirt Floor Drive pump worth £89.99.
- The 'That's Gotta Hurt' winner will receive a Lezyne Port-A-Shop toolkit worth £99.99.
- The 'Hardcore Heroes' winner will receive an Effetto Mariposa Caffélatex Tubeless Conversion Kit worth £49.99

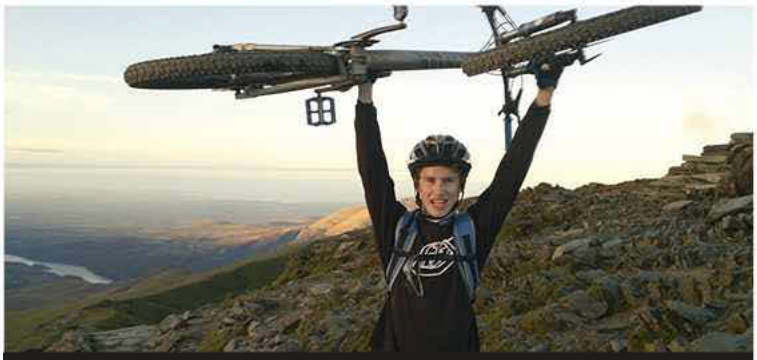
Turn to p14 for full *Mountain Biking UK* terms and conditions.



ORLAITH SENIOR enjoys the good life, 2,000m up in the Austrian Alps



Here's **FRANKIE BERKS**, looking very happy with herself after making it up a technical climb!



"This is my son **SAM**, happy to make it to the top of Snowdon by 4.15pm after many punctures," says **CHRIS HINSON**. "The route back down the Ranger Path in total darkness was an experience too!"



CERITH HALFPENNY catches some air on Brechfa's final section. Pic by **LUCY REES**



Thirteen-year-old **JON HEASMAN** soars through the winter mist at Perry Wood in Kent

WIN Effetto tubeless kit



MBUK STAR PHOTO



SIMON THORN took this great wintry shot of his mate **SIMON HUBBARD** on the Verderer's trail at a frosty Forest of Dean

WHAT YOU COULD WIN...

The Lezyne CNC Dirt Floor Drive track pump is made from durable CNC machined aluminium and has an oversized barrel, piston, hose and connectors to deliver twice as much air per stroke and quickly fill tyres or seat tubeless tyre systems. For more info, visit **www.upgradebikes.co.uk**.



"**IAN**, **JUDITH** and **CARL** were past being cold," says **KATE HORSFALL**, who took this pic on a winter ride in the Lakes

MBUK STACK IT



"Don't drink and ride," warns **LOUIS PARKER**. We're not sure what's worse – crashing or spilling some of that precious amber nectar. Pic by **LEE NEWHEISER**



DOMINIC WARD eyes up his landing at Swinley Forest. Pic by **ALAN MOREY**

MBUK THAT'S GOTTA HURT



We see plenty of broken limbs here at *MBUK*, but not many where the bone sticks out quite this far. Bet that smarted a bit! The worst thing is, **ADAM WARWICK** did this damage on the road, when he slid out mid-corner on his mountain bike after hitting a drain cover.

WIN Lezyne tool package



TWEETS OF THE MONTH



This place is so wet, there's trout in some of the turns! #wetlatter

We know Adam Brayton loves fishing, but he's started seeing fish on the trails of Whinlatter... The boy needs help!





Stoked on my new bike! #scott2luvit

It feels like Neko Mulally has been on Trek forever so we're looking forward to what he's going to do on this beauty!





Had fun shredding with @szymongodziek and @marisornins at my local on the weekend #winterfun

Blake Samson's not letting the winter weather get in the way of some quality time down the dirt jumps!





Awesome day of shuttle runs in the rain with @26griz & @TaylorVernon67... Best dirt I've ever ridden

Gee Atherton's swapped the Welsh valleys for SoCal, taking the weather with him! Just goes to show, you can't hide from the rain, even in California...



Flowing #postoffice. Thanks for the new Jackal frame @santacruzbicycles

Logan Peat's been making the most of this classic Californian jump spot before it gets demolished.



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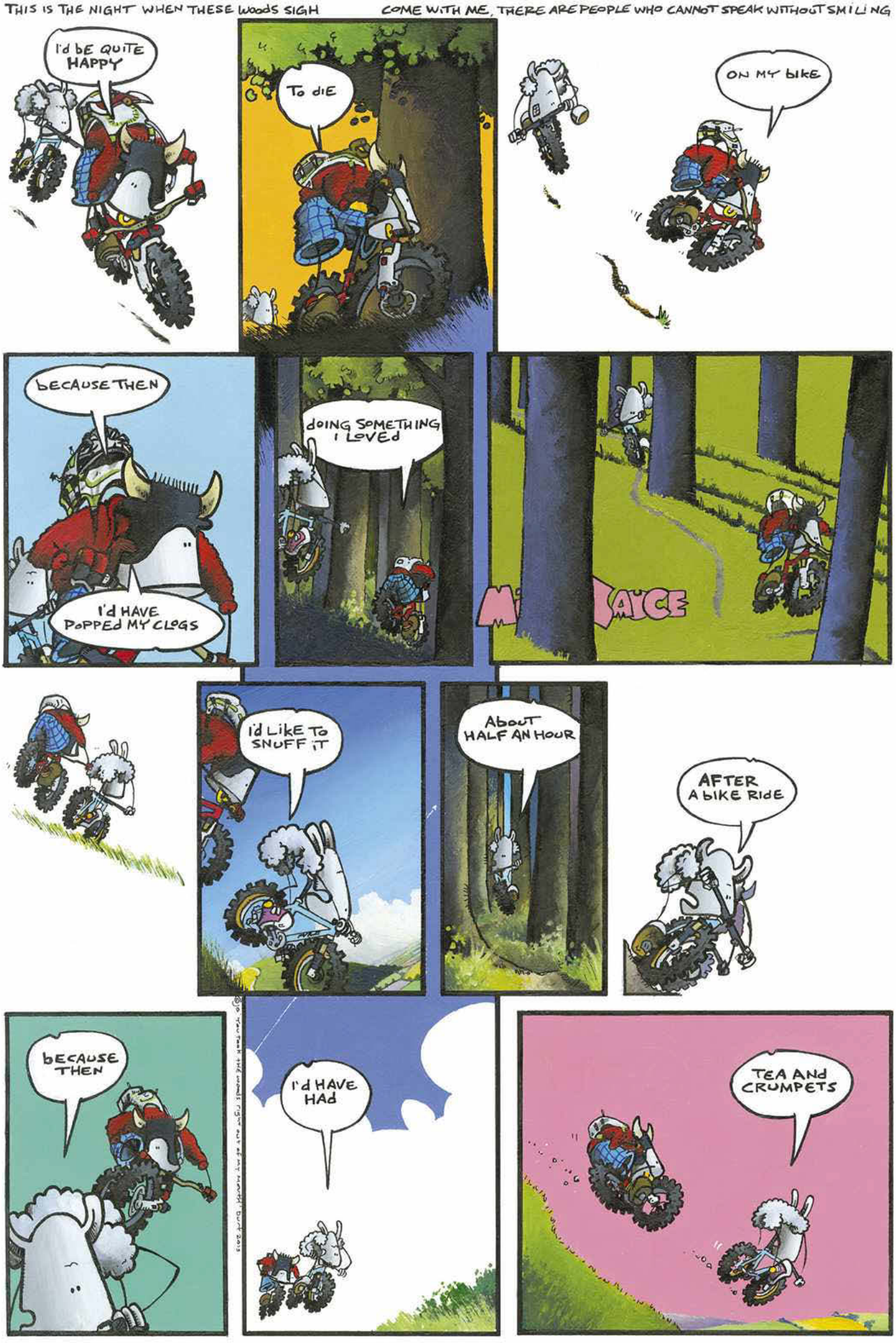


@philthurlow bagged this epic sunrise shot on the North York Moors



Little did **@rowanevans96** know that the *MBUK* van was about to photobomb him...


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To dIE
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bECAUSE THEN
I'd HAVE POPPED MY CLOGS
doING SOMETHING I LOVEd
I'd LIKE TO SNUFF IT
About HALF AN HOUR
AFTER A bIKE RIDE
bECAUSE THEN
I'd HAVE HAd
TEA AND CRUMPETS



GET TO THE DOWNS AND YOU'LL BE REWARDED. THE STIFF FRAME AND PROGRESSIVE SUSPENSION ARE READY TO TAKE AN ABSOLUTE BATTERING

MBUK FirstRides

FEATURING: NS Bikes Snabb E1 // Stanton Switchback Ti // Mondraker Foxy Carbon RR



The 1x10 drivetrain has a chain guide for extra peace of mind



The Snabb combines decent angles with a solid spec

NS BIKES SNABB E1

EXCLUSIVE

FRAME 6061/6066-T6 aluminium, 163mm (6.4in) travel **FORK** RockShox Pike RC, 160mm (6.3in) travel **SHOCK** RockShox Monarch RT3 DebonAir **DRIVETRAIN** SRAM S1400 cranks w/ Mozartt S3 chain guide, X9 rear mech, X7 shifter and 42t e*thirteen EX Cog (1x10) **WHEELSET** NS Rotary hubs, NS Enigma Lite (F) and Enigma (R) rims, Schwalbe Hans Dampf (F) and Rock Razor (R) 27.5x2.35in tyres **BRAKES** SRAM Guide R **BAR/STEM** NS Evidence Light, 762mm/NS Magneto, 47mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** X-Fusion Strate, 150mm/Octane One Rocket **WEIGHT** 14kg (30.9lb) w/o pedals **PRICE** £3,199.99 (complete bike) **CONTACT** Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

The Snabb is NS's first crack at a true do-it-all machine. The range is split into two categories – trail (T) and enduro (E). We took the burlier, longer travel, top-of-the-tree E1 out for an exclusive First Ride to see just what it could handle.

The frame

The slacker, more aggressive E frames not only pump out more travel than the T version – 163mm (6.4in) versus 142mm (5.6in) – but also get a slightly heavier, more robust tubeset. The threaded BB is easier to work on than the press-fit kind, and though the bike comes with internally routed cables, external guides are included too. There's also internal routing for a 'stealth' dropper post. We were a little concerned about rear mud clearance, but it turns out our pre-production frame had shorter than standard chainstays (425mm rather than 430mm) so this shouldn't be an issue on production bikes.

The kit

It's hard to argue with the inclusion of the formidable RockShox Pike fork and Monarch DebonAir shock, and the X-Fusion Strate post offers a whopping 150mm (5.9in) of adjustment so you can get it well out of the way when descending. The Rock Razor rear tyre offers good rolling speed in the dry but its low tread profile makes it a touch dicey when things are damp out, let alone boggy and cloggy.

The ride

Hop on to the Snabb and it's clear NS aren't messing about when it comes to the angles. The 607mm effective top tube on our medium frame helped sit us in a comfortable climbing position and, when combined with the slack 65.2-degree head angle, gives the bike the sort of surefooted confidence and stability you really need when the trail steepens. And it's these sort of trails where the E1 thrives.

Its 14kg weight means it'll never be the nippiest bike on the ups. Fortunately NS have had the foresight to add a 42t sprocket to the cassette. The gaps between gears are apparent on flatter sections, but hit something steep and you'll really appreciate the crawler cog, which lets you keep riding rather than pushing.

Get to the downs and you'll be rewarded. The stiff frame and progressive suspension are ready to take an absolute battering. Suspension balance between the Pike fork and Monarch shock is impressive, and you'll be rewarded if you take the time to play with shock pressures. We ran close to 35 per cent sag at the rear, which left the back end feeling sensitive over smaller chatter but plenty progressive enough on the bigger hits. The E1 is just as happy taking on challenging, technical downhill runs on uplift days as it is on tamer trail centre descents, providing you don't mind taking a more patient approach when it comes to tackling the climbs. **ROB**

FirstRides RATED

With a solid spec to match its solid ride, the E1's not the sprightliest on the climbs but is a hard-hitting beast on the descents

★★★★☆

FirstRides Ratings

WE BASE OUR SCORES ON VALUE FOR MONEY AND PERFORMANCE

★★★★★ **EXCEPTIONAL:** A genuine class leader

★★★★☆ **VERY GOOD:** One of the best you can buy

★★★☆☆ **GOOD:** It'll do the job and do it well

★★☆☆☆ **BELOW AVERAGE:** Flawed in some way

★☆☆☆☆ **POOR:** Simply put, don't bother!





↑ This top-spec build will set you back nearly £6k. Just look at it though...

↓ A custom drawn seat tube gives the frame the ride feel Dan Stanton was looking for



STANTON SWITCHBACK TI

FRAME 3Al-2.5V titanium **FORK** BOS Deville AM, 140mm (5.5in) travel **DRIVETRAIN** SRAM X01 w/ Race Face Next SL crankset **WHEELSET** ENVE M70 rims, Chris King hubs, Onza Ibex 27.5x2.4in (F) and 27.5x2.25in (R) tyres **BRAKES** Hope Tech 3 E4 **BAR/STEM** Race Face Next 35, 760mm/Race Face Turbine 35, 50mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** RockShox Reverb/SDG Duster **WEIGHT** 11.3kg/24.9lb w/o pedals **PRICE** £1,599 (frame)/£5,890.80 (complete build here) **CONTACT** Stanton Bikes www.stantonbikes.com

Building on the success of the hard-hitting Slackline, Stanton's Switchback hardtail turned the aggressive riding dial up a notch with its slacker geometry and bigger wheels. We couldn't wait to hit the hills on this beautifully crafted, if pricey, Ti version.

The frame

To ensure there's stiffness where there needs to be but still enough of that compliance that titanium frames are famed for, the Switchback Ti uses triple-butted 3Al-2.5V top and down tubes, plus a custom drawn, triple butted seat tube.

When it comes to geometry, there are similarities with its smaller-wheeled counterpart, the Slackline Ti. The stubby 415mm chainstay length and low 312mm BB height remain the same, but are adapted to work with the bigger 650b wheels. The slack 64.4-degree head angle is a Switchback and Switchback Ti special though.

Other nice touches include interchangeable dropouts (10x135mm, 12x142mm or horizontal), ISCG chain guide mounts and a 44mm head tube complete with beautiful pewter head badge. The frame will comfortably take a 2.3in tyre out back.



↑ The 44mm head tube lets you run a stiffer tapered-steerer fork

The kit

We were lucky enough to throw a leg over the highest spec Switchback Ti, which comes with super-stiff ENVE M70 rims built on Chris King hubs, a 140mm (5.5in) travel BOS Deville AM fork and an 11-speed transmission built around super-light Race Face Next SL cranks. All this finery will set you back an eye-watering £5,890.80 though. There is a slightly cheaper full build version available for £4,179.78, with e*thirteen TRS wheels and Race Face Turbine cranks, but we're guessing the £1,599 frame only option is what most people will go for.

The ride

Get stuck into some technical, flowing singletrack and you'll soon see where the Switchback Ti excels. The low BB and slack head angle spew confidence and allow you to carve corners at pace and tackle steep, awkward sections with poise. The well supported, smooth stroke of the 140mm BOS fork helps here too.

Stanton have done a good job of balancing accurate technical handling with playful agility. Changes of direction are a rapid, precise affair and the stumpy chainstays and light overall weight – 11.3kg (24.9lb) – help make things feel nimble and fun, even after a good few miles in your legs and on the most nadgery, physical trails.

If we were being really picky, a touch more length in the front centre would be a bonus when tackling really high speed, bump riddled tracks – the effective top tube length on our 16.5in frame was 590.6mm – and we don't think it'd detract from the bike's spirited nature. That said, the Switchback Ti still feels really bloody good. It's aggressive and chuckable when you want it to be, yet efficient and forgiving enough to be comfortable for longer rides too. **ROB**

FirstRides RATED

Not cheap, but the ride quality, nimble feel and fun factor make it one of the most exciting hardtails we've ridden

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Well bastard fast





↑ The Foxy Carbon RR has a shorter fork and steeper head angle than the XR

↓ Mondraker's Zero suspension system is taut under power but still sucks up bumps



MONDRAKER FOXY CARBON RR

FRAME Stealth Carbon, 140mm (5.5in) travel **FORK** Fox 34 Float 27.5 FIT CTD Remote Factory, 140mm (5.5in) travel **SHOCK** Fox Float CTD Boost Valve Remote LV Factory **DRIVETRAIN** SRAM X01 w/ X1 cranks (1x11) **WHEELSET** CrankBrothers Cobalt 3 wheels, Maxxis Ardent 27.5x2.25in tyres **BRAKES** Formula CR3 **BAR/STEM** OnOff Stoic Carbon, 740mm/OnOff Stoic FG, 30mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** RockShox Reverb Stealth/fi'zi:k Nisene MG **WEIGHT** 12.5kg/27.6lb (M) **PRICE** £4,999 **CONTACT** Silverfish www.silverfish-uk.com

Having taken the world by storm with their revolutionary geometry, Mondraker have now broached the world of composite frame construction. After trying the longer-forked Foxy Carbon XR at its launch in Spain (issue 309), we were keen to try the lower-specced RR in more typical UK conditions.

The frame

Although the Foxy Carbon has the same extra-long Forward Geometry, stubby 30mm stem and 140mm (5.5in) of rear travel as the alloy Foxy, this composite incarnation is a different animal. Moving to carbon fibre has shaved a claimed 400g off the frame weight, giving this middle-of-the-range RR model an all-up weight of 12.5kg (27.6lb).



↑ Fork and shock remotes add to the spider's web of cables, but don't add much to the ride

The kit

Just as on the XR version, the Zero suspension system is controlled by a Fox Float CTD shock, with a bar mounted remote so you can toggle between modes. The same lever also adjusts the Kashima coated Fox 34 fork.

The mixed SRAM 11-speed drivetrain combines an X1 alloy crankset with X01 everywhere else. Mondraker are one of just a few brands to spec CrankBrothers wheels on their high-end bikes – in this case, a set of Cobalt 3s. Stopping is handled by Formula's CR1 brakes.

The ride

The carbon Foxy has a nicely muted but not dead feel, with no hint of flex. It's also ridiculously quick. The Zero suspension feels taut under power, cutting out pedal bob very effectively, but still sucks up bumps in a hugely capable way. The low-slung and long geometry keeps your weight centred, allowing you to subtly shift weight forwards or backwards to maximise grip. Even when the Maxxis Ardent tyres are at the limits of traction, the bike carves through turns in a way akin to powder skiing.

Mondraker's speccing of a bar-mounted suspension remote on both the Foxy Carbon XR and RR seems bizarre given that the Foxy pedals well without such interference – we left it in fully open 'descend' mode for the majority of our rides. The fact the fork and shock are linked also means you can't adjust their low-speed compression damping independently, scuppering you from adjusting the balance of the bike, which is a little frustrating.

Although the CrankBrothers wheels look trick, they're insanely flexy. Given a big enough berm and enough cornering speed, the rear tyre leaves marks on the chainstay – and the Foxy has plenty of tyre clearance. Gas it down a rocky section and you'll quickly find yourself off line as the wheel flex fires you in directions you'd really rather not go. We didn't get on with the Formula CR1 brakes either – the tangential lever pull means it can't be run close in to the bar without power tailing off, and we had issues with brake rub and excess drag when they got warm too. **JON**

FirstRides RATED

A superb lightweight trail bike frame with blinding performance potential, neutered slightly by flawed finishing kit

For all the latest breaking news check out bikeradar.com



SPICY 527 Ei

OST+ SUSPENSION SYSTEM
AUTO COMPATIBLE
C6 CARBON ALU FRAME
INTERNAL CABLE ROUTING
TELESCOPIC SEATPOST
27.5 WHEEL SIZE



IT RULES THE MOUNTAINS!

It's no accident that the Spicy has been the favourite bike of Nicolas Vouilloz for the past few seasons. After all, he did play a big role in it's creation. For 2015, our king of enduro repeats the same blend that has made it top of the list for privateers worldwide for several years. Developed around 150 mm OST+ kinematics, the Spicy is more efficient uphill and faster downhill than ever before. With 27.5" wheels, Ei shock and geometry developed by Nico Vouilloz the Spicy is an amazing bike over any terrain.

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MBUK First Look

Tasty bits of new kit to get excited about





SPECIALIZED ENDURO EXPERT CARBON 650B

SO PROUD WERE they of the mighty Enduro 29 that Specialized were reluctant to introduce a smaller-wheeled 650b version, but they've now caved in to rider demand. In essence, this is the old 26in-wheeled Enduro frame with a redesigned back end. Don't write it off as a cut-and-shut though. The bigger wheels, slacker geometry and killer spec should see it pulling no punches against the best of the enduro field. Indeed, on its first World Series outing, Curtis Keene piloted his Enduro 650b to a personal-best third place. The Expert model sports the same FACT IS-X 11m carbon front triangle and M5 alloy rear end as the top-end S-Works version, as well as a 1x11 drivetrain and super-wide Roval Traverse Fattie wheels. Is it faster than the 29er? There's only one way to find out...

£4,600 Specialized www.specialized.com

WTB HIGH TAIL CARBON AND VOLT CARBON SADDLES

WTB'S HIGH TAIL saddle has been designed with input from suspension specialist Dave Weagle and features a strikingly concave rear end designed to prevent rear wheel buzz when you're running the seat down low on a long-travel bike. At 159g for the carbon railed version, it's light enough to bolt on to an XC bike. The Volt is a more conventional perch that aims to combine race-ready weight (156g in carbon guise) with all-day comfort thanks to generous padding, a low nose and a deep "love channel" that should keep you ready for action, on the bike or off it!

High Tail £179.99, Volt £160
Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com





O'NEAL APPALACHEE KNEE PADS

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NARROW/WIDE CHAINRINGS and clutch mechs are everywhere these days and they've left many single-ring riders scratching their heads and asking, "Do I really need a chain guide too?" For the racers out there and those wanting extra peace of mind, the answer is, "Yes, but probably just a top guide." Gamut's svelte Trail SXC fits the bill nicely. With an aluminium backplate and polyurethane guide it weighs in at a mere 55g (ISCG-05 version) and is designed to keep your chain on track with minimal noise. It's available in a BB mount version too, and accommodates 30-40t rings. It doesn't look half bad either.

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SuperBike

MBUK

#51 Sam Reynolds' Polygon Collosus N9

WHY IS THIS A SUPER BIKE?

- Radical frame design looks like nothing else currently out there
- Proven in the 2014 Enduro World Series, with Polygon UR team riders Aurelien Giordanengo and Jamie Nicoll both finishing within the top 20
- Capable of handling the abuse dished out by Reynolds, including being dropped off a cliff!

Marmite machine

An enduro bike fit for a slopestyle slayer

Famed for his aerial antics on the FMB World Tour, Sam Reynolds is a rider who pushes his bikes to the point of no return. The 160mm (6.3in) travel Collosus N9 represents a bit of a departure from his usual hardtails and freeride rigs though.

"I've never owned or even ridden an enduro style bike before. I usually just slog my downhill bike up the climbs and wonder why I'm so unfit," says Sam. "It's so light I can power up climbs that previously I'd have to push up so I get back to the top quicker for, let's be honest, the fun bit, which is bombing downhill! It could be my favourite bike now."

Go big or go home

Sam's already been getting up to some hair-raising antics on the bike. "I take »

Words Olly Forster **Pics** Jacob Gibbins



WHO IS SAM REYNOLDS?

Hailing from South East England, Sam Reynolds is one of the UK's top freeriders, specialising in dirt jumping and slopestyle. But with mates like World Cup downhiller Brendan Fairclough, he also likes to get up to speed in the hills, where he's been introducing the Collosus to some colossal jumps, gaps and drops.

FLAT OUT

The 'flattened' end to the swingarm has been designed to increase stiffness and provide a solid clamping area for the rear through-axle.

ENDURO READY

With its carbon frame, ISCG-05 chain guide tabs, 12x142mm rear end and internal cable routing for a 'stealth' dropper seatpost, the Collosus N9 has all the features any enduro racer could ask for.

TAKING NO CHANCES

Sam runs a 1x10 drivetrain made up of an e*thirteen TRS crankset and LG1 chain guide paired with a Shimano cassette, chain, shifter and clutch rear mech, ensuring that his chain stays on over even the roughest terrain.

FLOATER

Aluminium links attached to the forward tips of the swingarm and chainstay compress the 'floating' rear shock from both ends, giving Polygon more control over the suspension curve and helping to isolate the damper from pedalling and braking forces.



HIP TO BE SQUARE
It's not just the rear end that looks unusual. The Collosus also has a huge rectangular head tube junction that helps to increase torsional stiffness – and to make the N9 stand out from the crowd.

DEMON DAMPING
"The bike's BOS suspension is next level. I can't even explain how good the Deville fork and Kirk shock are – you'll just have to try them to believe what I'm saying," says Sam about his special French dampers.

my role as Polygon's bike tester pretty seriously so I try to push the bike to its absolute limits, and it's kind of annoyed me that I haven't managed to break it," he says. "It took a 100m cartwheel down a steep rock face in Morzine, France, which took a 20-minute hike back down the mountain to recover. The only damage was a few scratches on the frame from rocks, and it's still rolling strong!"

Not only is the Collosus the Indonesian company's first foray into the world of enduro racing, but it's also been built using new manufacturing techniques aimed at delivering a bike that looks and feels like no other. Its unique appearance divides opinion, but that was always the plan.

"As a new player in the global bicycle market we realised that we needed to revamp our product performance from an aesthetic point of view," says Zendy Renan, Polygon's product development manager. "We wanted to create a bike that you'd either like or hate. The purpose was to gain traction by creating a buzz."

"I love how it's a bit of a Marmite bike," says Sam. "You either love the style or you hate it, but either way, people always seem to be pretty opinionated about it. I think it looks rad – like a spaceship or something!"

Enduro ambitions

Part of the reason for the bike's unique look is Polygon's FS3 suspension system – a 'floating shock' design aimed at making this long-travel machine pedal as efficiently as possible. "Our main goal was to optimise anti-squat (a force used by suspension designers to limit pedalling-induced bob) and minimise pedalling kickback around the 650b wheel size," says Zendy. "We increased anti-squat to around the 100% level even when the bike is reaching 40 to 60 per cent of its travel, because we found that enduro riders were pedalling hard not just on the flat sections but on the rough sections as well."

He adds: "We also adjusted the main pivot location [compared to the previous Collosus] in order to modify the wheel travel path and reduce chain growth in the last section of its travel, reducing pedal kickback and helping to reduce fatigue in the rider's legs on rougher trails."

So, will we see Sam hitting the enduro scene any time soon? "Well, I was going to say 'absolutely not', but thinking about it, I've heard those Enduro World Series guys like to party and have fun so maybe I could go and check out a race or two? As long as there's a big enough jump somewhere on the course so I can throw in a few whips or flips so I don't get bored!"

THE ESSENTIALS

PRICE: US$5,799 with SRAM XX1 and Fox suspension (no UK distributor at present)
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ALSO LOOK AT: Mondraker Dune XR £4,699 www.silverfish-uk.com

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"The wider 95mm platform, 10 aggressive grub screw pins per side and concave shaping mean the updated V12s don't disappoint when it comes to grip. They'll take a battering on the trail too and are easy to service when the time comes." **Rob Weaver, Senior Technical Editor, *Mountain Biking UK***

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LEADING LADIES

Two young British riders took the downhill scene by storm last year. We caught up with Manon Carpenter and Tahnée Seagrave to find out more about the super-talented duo

Words and pics Chris Davison







It'll go down as an amazing year for British cycling in general, but 2014 was also the year when a new generation of female stars came to the fore in the high-octane world of downhill racing. While their peers back home were out partying, Manon Carpenter and Tahnée Seagrave were busy putting in the training miles and gym time needed to take them to the very top of the sport. And it paid off, with Manon dominating the World Cup series, Tahnée racking up a series of podium spots and a British whitewash at the World Champs.

But just what did it take to get to where they are now? We caught up with Manon and Tahnée at Antur Stiniog in North Wales to find out...

Enter the Dragon

Reigning world and World Cup champ Manon was born into a world of bikes, as the daughter of Dragon Downhill Series organiser Jason Carpenter. "I don't have a first memory of learning to ride – I guess I started too early for that," says the Madison | Saracen rider. "But I do recall getting myself into situations – going too fast at the jumps, downhill or on motorbikes, with my dad having to grab me off the bike at the last moment and us both ending up in a heap or a less than graceful »

"I recall getting myself into situations – going too fast... I was definitely the dangerous kid!" Manon Carpenter



Style and flair are part of Manon's riding repertoire



Manon uses her BMX background to maximum effect



Tahnée grew up in Morzine, where she honed her bike skills

faceplant. I was definitely the dangerous kid!"

Manon started out riding BMX, something that's apparent in her effortless, flowing style and the way she pumps the trail to find speed that eludes others. But the Welshwoman soon moved on to mountain bikes. "We rode all sorts of bikes, but downhill was the main focus because we often helped out with the races my dad ran," she says. "Most people seem to remember me as the little kid in the timing van at the top of the mountain, usually in a sleeping bag trying to keep warm!"

Manon has some advice for aspiring young riders: "Getting involved in the local bike scene is important – it's good to have other riders around to help you out and give you tips. I've always found other riders are really welcoming and encouraging. Practice days or mini DH races are a good place to get involved."

Follow the dream

For Tahnée, the biking bug didn't really bite until she was eight. The Seagrave clan had relocated from London to the MTB mecca of Morzine, France to run a chalet, but she was content riding the more family friendly trails. That all changed when she witnessed Vanessa Quin win the DH World Champs up the road in Les Gets. As a family friend the Kiwi's win made a big impression on Tahnée. She set her heart on racing downhill, and Vanessa, along with her parents, helped sort her out with her first DH-capable bike, an Intense 6.6.

"My mum and dad have always been the reason behind everything I do, pushing me and supporting me 100 per cent," says Tahnée. "They've made a lot of sacrifices. FMD (Follow My Dream) Racing was started because Dad knew girls didn't get as much support as boys in the sport." Initially set up to support Tahnée and her brother Kaos's racing ambitions, the team has gone on to help other young riders, including Mike Jones – now with CRC/Nukeproof – and Neil Stewart.

"Don't feel embarrassed about starting on small, easy things – we all did!" says Tahnée. "Build up your confidence, and when you feel ready, step it up. If you don't succeed, try and try again. You'll get there eventually!"

Time to shine

Both Manon and Tahnée were junior world champs, Manon in 2011 and Tahnée in 2013. "Winning in 2011 gave me the opportunity to train full-time ready for my first year in Elite," says Manon. But things didn't quite go to plan. "In my first race as an Elite in 2012 I placed second at the Pietermaritzburg World Cup, less than a second off the win, and went on to win the next two UK nationals. I felt so confident. But then a broken collarbone at the second World Cup set me back for the rest of the season." Tahnée faced setbacks after her win too, due to a bad winter in the Alps. "I rode my bike twice in six or seven months," she says. »

BIKE CHECK

MANON AND TAHNÉE'S TRAIL BIKES

Off the race track, a versatile mid-travel bike is these girls' weapon of choice



Manon's Saracen Ariel 152

"With 650b wheels and 150mm (5.9in) of travel, it's the perfect all-round bike! Mine is a team edition so I've got a few different parts to the stock bike, but the frame and the Fox suspension are the same. I have a Fox DOSS seatpost, Shimano Saint components, DT Swiss rims and a Pro bar, stem and saddle. I run a 750mm bar, XC tubes at 25psi, and my suspension is soft but quick – I like to be playful!"



Tahnée's Devinci Troy

"My beautiful Troy is amazing for training on. It has 140mm (5.5in) of travel and 650b wheels, Shimano Zee and Pro components, Marzocchi suspension, Schwalbe Hans Dampf tyres (I love the way they dig in and feel in the corners but roll so well), Tune hubs and CrankBrothers pedals. I run a 760mm bar and a 30psi tubeless tyre set-up. I like my suspension fast and jumpy so it's set quite hard."

"Then I tore the ligaments in my ankle and didn't ride again till mid March, and that was with an injury."

Entering the 2014 season, the two women were pitted against each wother in the Elite category for the first time. The year got off to a great start when Manon took her first World Cup win at the opening round in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. With reigning champ Rachel Atherton recovering from a stomach virus, some speculated that the victory was a fluke, but they were soon silenced when Manon went on to win the fourth and fifth rounds. As the season reached its climax in Méribel, France, she rode a conservative race to secure her first series title. Tahnée had also been grabbing podium spots, and at the last round she came out all guns blazing to seize fifth on the day and in the overall rankings with a blistering run. That just left the World Championships, and on September 7 the two girls, along with Rachel, did the unimaginable, taking the top three spots for Great Britain, with Manon securing the double.



Living in North Wales means fantastic riding on Tahnée's doorstep

Full-time job

Before the podiums and glory came a lot of hard work and sacrifice. While other girls their age are out partying, Manon and Tahnée have to follow strict off-season training regimes. "I'd say an average week consists of 10 to 15 hours of training," says 19-year-old Tahnée. "I'm also smart about rest. To be honest, I'm not really fussed about the whole party side of things. I like to let my hair down every now and then, but I'm more of a 'hot chocolate in front of a fire and *The X Factor*' kind of girl!"

Manon says: "When I'm training five days a week and riding on weekends I don't really have the energy for going out, and I'm always conscious of the need to not overdo it and make myself ill. October is the month when I try to get everything out of my system and remember how to be a 21-year-old girl again! Then I'm ready to settle back into training."

On target

So what are their plans for this year? "I've just moved to North Wales," says Tahnée. "I was in Sheffield for a while, but going from somewhere as amazing as the Alps to a – no disrespect – claustrophobic city just wasn't for me. Where I am now I can ride every weekend and hook up with riders like Manon. I moved to get more DH time. I'd like to be on the gas as soon as the first race comes this year, not the last!" Manon's targets are more precise. "I still need to win the National Champs – that's the one thing I haven't yet won as an Elite. I also want to win the Fort William World Cup – I haven't had a year when it's gone well yet, even though it's such a good track for me."

Whatever happens this season, with Manon, Tahnée and Rachel all at the top of their game, British women's downhill racing is in safe hands...



These two love what they do and do what they love



ROLE MODELS

GIVING SOMETHING BACK

Both girls take their roles as ambassadors for the sport very seriously. Several times during our day together they sign autographs and have photos taken with fans, with one rider even asking to have their photo taken by Tahnée, the so-called 'queen of the selfie'. Manon had just come from a women's riding weekend with DH and enduro champ Tracy Moseley, where they rode and stayed with a group of 20 amateur riders. They're paving the way for a new generation of riders, and efforts like these mean the world to their fans.



"I'd say an average week consists of 10 to 15 hours of training. I'm not really fussed about partying" Tahnée Seagrave



The rocky trails at Antur are child's play for Manon and Tahnée

TIPS FROM THE TOP

HOW TO RIDE LIKE MANON AND TAHNÉE

"Working on your bike skills will go a long way," says Manon. "Learning to manual over bumps, bunnyhop and make speed by pumping will help no end on the trails. Being able to hop over a root or rock and carry speed makes life a lot easier, and faster. Judge your speed so you can brake before the corners and carry your momentum through the turns. This will give you more grip in the corners too. Have fun and enjoy the challenge!"

Tahnée adds: "When it's windy, don't try to take off on open sections! And I'd recommend getting some earplugs as well, because the amount of male talk out on the trails is tiring!"



Manon was pretty much born on a bike – and it shows

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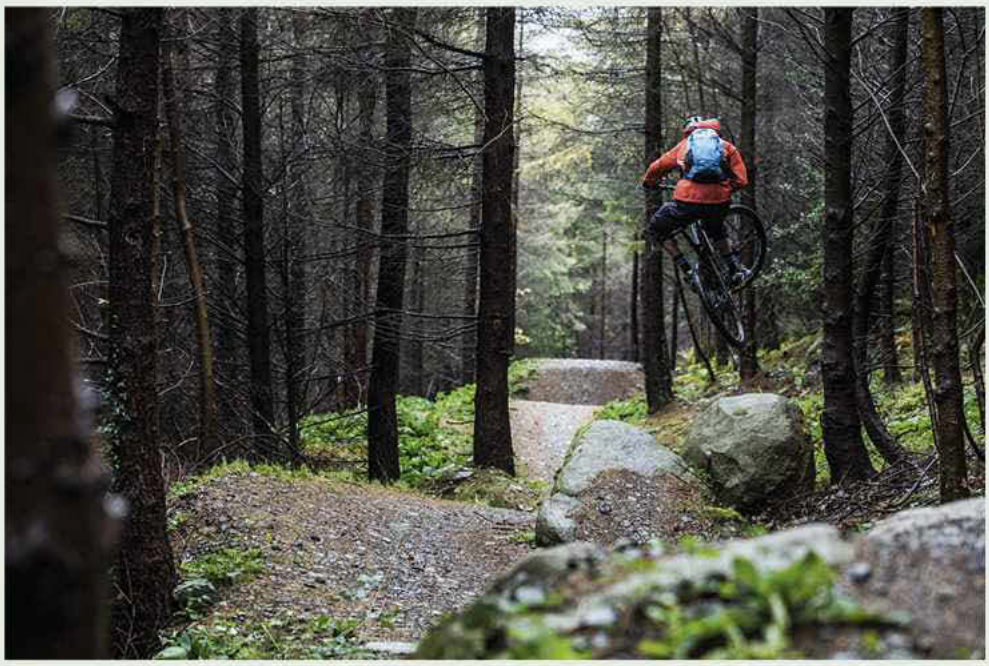
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ALTERNATIVE ULSTER

Northern Ireland's new network of trail centres, deep in the heart of the country, make for a great roadtrip of discovery

Words Ric McLaughlin **Pics** Simon Nieborak

The nose of the car points upwards, and with a loud clunk comes a shaft of bright, early winter sunlight. We file off the ferry and into the port of Belfast. The morning's rain glints back up off the industrial tarmac and the huge cranes glisten with droplets.

Belfast is in many ways the beating heart of Northern Ireland. Although the country boasts several cities, the capital is by far its *grande dame* (its population is nearly 200,000 greater than Londonderry, the next biggest city at 84,000, fact fans). It's a city emerging from a troubled, difficult past into a blossoming, bustling cosmopolitan sprawl.

Photographer Simon Nieborak and I are passing it by though. The gleaming stainless steel modern statues and motorway quickly »

give way to the tight, sinewy ribbons of tarmac that link most of the country. Our three-day tour of Northern Ireland's new trail centres will take us deep into rural Ulster, far away from Belfast's franchised coffee shops and 4G mobile coverage.

Bikes in the ballroom

By the time we arrive in Castlewellan, County Down, it's already dark and rain is gently buffeting the car. Our hotel, Hillyard House, feels fresh and new, and after stashing our bikes in the high-ceilinged ballroom, we make for Maginns pub. It's a Tardis of a place, with oak panels lining two open-plan floors filled with everything from stuffed owls to piles of dusty poetry books. The Guinness slides down easily and Simon and I start planning our next few days' worth of riding.

Up early next morning, the Castlewellan trailhead car park is only a minute's ride from the hotel and any stout-induced fug is quickly blasted away by the arrival of Glyn O'Brien. The Newry man and downhill racer is an icon of Northern Irish mountain biking – in the 90s he was the first rider from the province to make it on to the world stage, riding for the infamous Animal Orange outfit. Top 10 places at World Cups and even a third at Red Bull Rampage in 2003 confirm his status as far more than just a local hero.

Glyn has an infectious energy and the quick spin to the top of the trails passes quickly. Castlewellan has been the surprise hit of the newly developed trail centres and is therefore the most visited.

Trail magic

Within the opening few minutes of the perhaps slightly overzealously labelled black trail, it's easy to see why – the magic flow of the best trail centres is here in abundance. There's lots of scope to get off the brakes, while bermed corners and rollers offer plenty of push and pop. Glyn even cracks out an impromptu doubling of two rollers, only to be forced into an emergency hip swivel around an overhanging stump. Geese skim the surface of the lake as we roll back to the cars, flicking back wheels at the deep banks of chocolate brown leaves as we go.

We're already behind schedule so we belt past the navy blue waters of Lough Island reservoir before dropping back down to the shores of Carlingford Loch and heading for the Kilbroney trails in Rostrevor. The plan had been to ride the uplift all afternoon, but with the Met Office forecasting a tsunami-like deluge the following day we opt for a quick spin around the centre's red/black loop instead.

We meet up with Vitus Bikes' Colin Ross and Sasha Bickerstaff in the car park and, with time against us, head up the long climb. The view from the summit is incredible – the loch sits mirror-like at the base of the rolling hills with the towns of Rostrevor, Warrenpoint and Carlingford clinging to its shores. The sun is already ominously low though, so there's not much time to admire the vista. We clip on, with Glyn and Colin taking it in turns to set the pace – in other words, we're soon going very fast.

Trail builder Dafydd Davies' excavations have exposed devilishly jagged shards of rock that pepper the trail and threaten to terminate your tyres' grip. Where Castlewellan, like many trail centres, made my 150mm-travel bike feel a tad too much, Rostrevor is proper enduro bike country. Brakes off and charging, occasionally relying on the bike to gather up the pieces, it's incredible fun.

The Whistledown Hotel in Warrenpoint frustrates Simon's neverending quest to photograph stereotypically Irish pubs, thanks to its comfy leather seating, tastefully neon-lit bar, and steel and glass everything. The further south we've come, the more 'Irish' things have »

MINI MILES

Small but perfectly formed

Chart a course around the best trail centres of Wales or Scotland and you'll comfortably be looking at a week on the road. Northern Ireland provided us with five unique centres within bang on the nose of 200 miles. The wintry lack of light coupled with a love of partaking of a few ales of an evening meant that Simon and Ric were rushing for a lot of their trip, but more daylight and some more organised ferry booking on their part would have produced an amazingly laidback riding holiday.



Belfast's Barnett Demesne offers micro trail centre fun in the city



Colin Ross and Glyn O'Brien – two of the province's finest exports



NORTHERN IRISH FOR BEGINNERS

A rudimentary guide to the lingo of a nation

"It's a quare job!" It is a highly impressive achievement.

"Aye, dead on!" Don't try to take me for a fool, sir.

"What about ye?!" How are you doing?

"I need to whip off the auld kex after thon!" That really was a close run thing. I think I need to change my underwear.

"Get away out of that, ye whore ye!" Remove yourself from my presence, you person of dubious merit.



Above Loch Carlingford, Rostrevor is proper enduro bike country. Brakes off and charging, it's incredible fun

The views at the top of Rostrevor's black run are as good as any



Glyn works the edges in Castlewellan





Castlewellan House nestles alongside the stunning lake



"Right, that's us and that's the pub..."









Davagh offers incredible trails. Once you find it



On the rocks – Davagh's terrain will test your skills

begun to feel. Gaelic translations have crept in under place names and the towns' frontages are more in keeping with those found in the Republic, mere miles away. After breakfast the following morning I take a walk along the sea wall as the weather batters it. Waves burst sporadically over the barrier in great showers of froth, while the hills holding two of the UK's most talked about downhill tracks are shrouded in thick, grey cloud.

Crash and burn

Mega Mission and On the Pulse are two very different beasts. The first is a pinner's bike park paradise, while the latter is awkward, rocky and technical. The jumps of Mega Mission have already set very real records for collarbone breaks, and their steep lips and blind backsides make it easy to see why.

I acknowledge within the opening few feet that I won't be staying with Glyn. The speed and berms married to an impressive length (1.8km) make it brilliant fun, but it's easy to see how you could exit clutching your shoulder in place. After a morning of runs with Ian from uplift provider East Coast Adventure, we peel off our saturated kit and sink a few warming coffees in the cafe.

An hour up the road, Fivemiletown feels a lot smaller than its name would suggest. The Valley Hotel's 200-space car park is populated exclusively by just our vehicle. We've missed our window of light to shoot the nearby trail network at Blessingbourne so opt instead for an early start south to Davagh in the morning.

I've never driven through the Sperrins before, a wild and untouched range of mountains offering some of Ireland's highest ground. In the low sun of the early morning, with mist rising off the swollen rivers and rolling auburn hillsides, it's a

GET A GUIDE

If it's your first time in Northern Ireland, why not splash out on a trail guide or skills coach to give you the inside line on the inside lines?

First Tracks MTB
Glyn O'Brien and co can offer everything from bike hire to skills tuition to guided rides around the country's best trails. You'll also laugh a lot.
www.firsttracksmtb.com

Rosco Lines
Colin Ross is one of the country's best skills coaches and provides expert tuition for individuals or groups at all the major centres. Again, you'll laugh a lot.
www.roscolines.com

Mountain Bike NI
The organising body of mountain biking in Northern Ireland, this is your number one website for planning any roadtrip to the province.
www.mountainbikeni.com

Devilishly jagged shards of rock pepper the trail and threaten to terminate your tyres' grip



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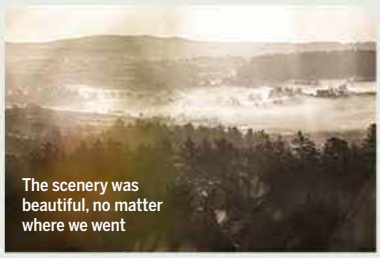
Watch Glyn O'Brien blasting down Mega Mission at Rostrevor trails on our MBUK blog **http://bit.ly/1xVTPu6**

MBUK.com





Yes, we got extremely wet. You'd expect no less in the Emerald Isle...



The scenery was beautiful, no matter where we went



stunning place. Davagh is, even by Irish standards, slap bang in the middle of nowhere though. Absolutely nowhere.

Feel the flow

Nukeproof's Chris McGlinchey is our guide for today and, even having ridden here before, is rocked by its remoteness. "It's a singletrack road for the last three miles," he laughs. "If you met anyone else you'd have to be pretty handy at reversing!" Unlike Davies' centres, Davagh was built by Phil Saxena's Architrail company and it feels far removed from what we've ridden so far. The descent splits in two, offering options on just how many berms, doubles, gaps and rollers you want. There's brilliant flow and as we snake through the trees I get sucked into following Chris's lines. More mist and steep rock among aromatic pine trees eventually lead us back to the car park.

An hour's drive later, and the small market towns make way for the bright lights of Belfast. It's been a blast.

THE DETAILS

How to get there and where to stay

Get there

You can fly to Belfast from most UK cities but travelling by car makes a lot more sense because of the amount of stuff you can bring with you and the amount of Guinness, Tayto crisps and Club Rock Shandy fizzy pop you can bring home. Stena Line have daily sailings from Cairnryan right into the heart of Belfast city centre. We'd recommend the £12 upgrade to Stena Plus for access to their lounge complete with wi-fi, free food and drinks (both soft and alcoholic) and comfortable seating.

Stay

Hillyard House, Castlewellan

There aren't many places in the UK where you can stay in spacious, modern comfort this close to the trailhead. Right in the middle of the town, it's a handy spot for stocking up on supplies too. **www.hillyardhouse.co.uk**, 0284 377 1999

The Whistledown Hotel, Warrenpoint

Boutique, friendly accommodation right in the heart of rural Co Down. Amazing food and just across the road from East Coast Adventure (**www.eastcoastadventure.com**), kings of the uplift service. **www.thewhistledownhotel.com**, 0284 175 4174

The Valley Hotel, Fivemiletown

The premier and possibly only place to stay in Fivemiletown. Friendly staff, great food and parking for 200 cars! **www.thevalleyhotel.com**, 0288 952 1505

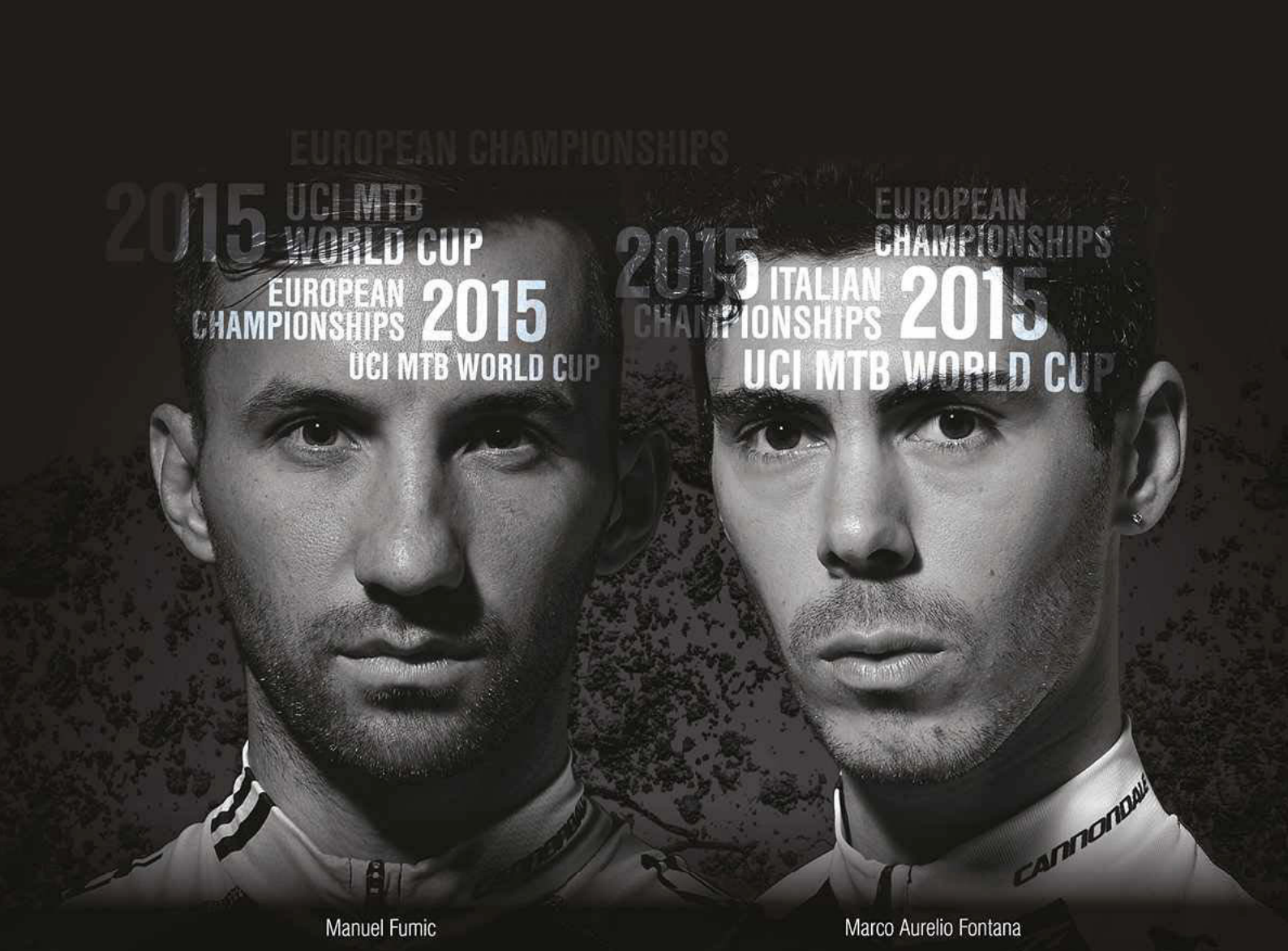
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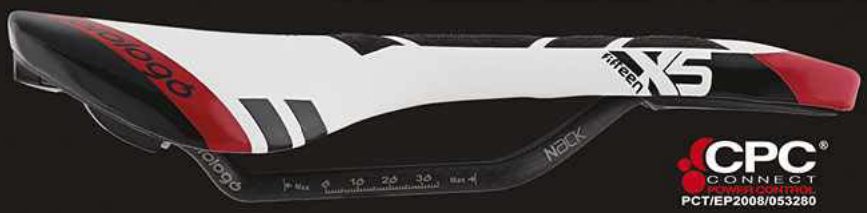
A packed nightclub on the weekends, it offers amazing food and more beers than you could shake a handlebar at.

Fresh Food Centre

These petrol station based shops were our number one food stops. Fresh sarnies, hot food and coffee on the move don't get cheaper or better.



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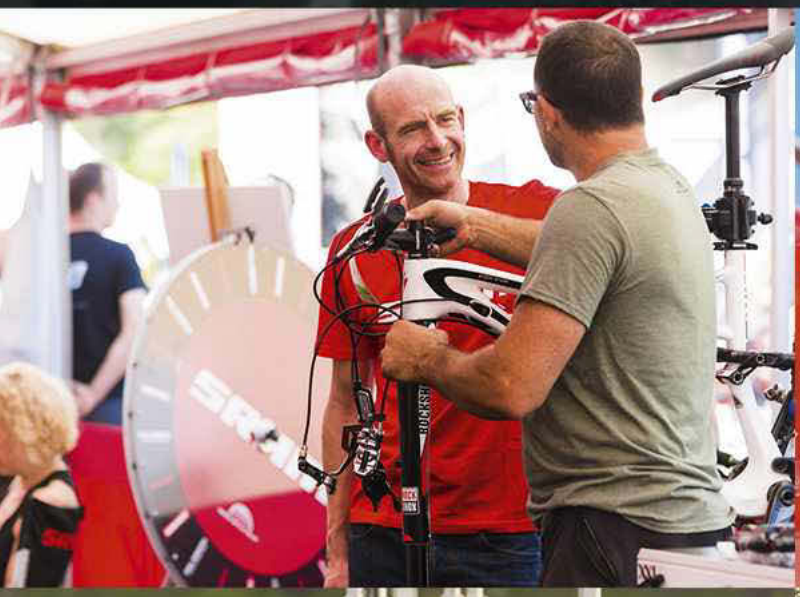
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PRO *for a day*

Guy Kesteven finds out what it's like to race XC with full factory support

Words Guy Kesteven **Pics** Russell Burton











The truck workshop is a small scale, subtle affair...



This fully supported rider malarkey ain't half bad

I'm sat on top of the SRAM truck in the sunny south of France, sipping an ice-cold energy drink while spinning my legs up to speed on Olympic world champ Jaroslav Kulhavý's turbo trainer and syncing my not-yet-available-to-the-public Quarq XX1 power meter cranks. Life doesn't get any more 'pro' than this and I'm loving it.

I'm here at the Roc d'Azur bike festival as a guest of SRAM, who reckon riding the event as though I'm a fully supported SRAM/Troy Lee Designs Racing rider is a great way to see how their latest kit performs. I've spent a couple of days riding the fantastic trails around Fréjus, and an afternoon stripping and retuning 'my' radical inverted RockShox RS-1 fork to my exact preference with Todd and the other tech guys. Alex and Altino from SRAM are working hard to answer my every diva demand for kit and fresh T-shirts, and my race entry, accommodation and wining and dining is sorted without me lifting a finger.

Out of place

I'm lucky that Roc d'Azur is a 'let your hair down' kind of end-of-season event, where you'll see even the top pros eating and drinking late into the night down by the mega-money yachts in the harbour, rather than counting calories in an oxygen tent. It's also one of the few races where 5,000 have-a-go heroes can race on the same course at the same time as the world's best XC riders (see our feature in *MBUK* 311). Thanks to SRAM's connections, Alex and I are almost on the front row of the first wave of mere mortals. The fact we see more V-brakes than baggy shorts confirms the type of weapons we're lining up with. Besides a couple of lucky pros up front, nobody else here is rocking an RS-1 fork and prototype RISE 60 wheels though.



Guy looks well chuffed to get his hands on RockShox's new RS-1 fork



We're well up in the mix as we charge out towards the hills. It's a Black Friday brawl as hyper-excited skinsuited speed freaks tangle pedals and bar ends at the inevitable pinch points, and we're surprised when the first slightly technical climb sees us overtaking more riders than we're being overtaken by. With several hours of racing ahead, we're not going to kill ourselves yet though.

Brits abroad

As soon as the trail crests out, the advantage tips in our favour. Saddles dropped and shocks unlocked, we're free to make the most of the superb swooping descents with their rock gardens and not just wheel but whole-bike-eating gullies and ruts. The RS-1 takes a bit of getting used to because the inverted design doesn't track as accurately as a conventional fork, so I straight-line trouble, enduro style – much to the very vocal alarm of the French hardtail riders, who are squealing as loud as their brakes on steep sections.

While the SRAM crew have loaded our pockets with everything from spares to snacks, we can't resist the feed stations, which look more like a local deli. The volunteers seem confused when we take time to chat, rather than frenziedly grabbing an armful of cake and screaming for a bottle refill like most other riders, »





What? Where? When?

ROC D'AZUR

Roc d'Azur is the largest mountain bike event in Europe. Last year over 20,000 riders, from top pros to have-a-go heroes, headed into the hills for five days of racing. Another 150,000 punters came to Fréjus just for the five-day festival. The bike expo, demo and display area is vast, and superbly organised events from enduro to fancy-dress parades make full use of the excellent local trails, with gruelling climbs rewarded by long technical descents. This was our first experience of the event, but we'll definitely be going back now we know how much is there. **www.rocazur.com**





A happy afternoon is spent in the workshop stripping down Guy's fork



Just a few spares in case of emergency





The bike and kit

HARD ROC'IN HARDWARE

Specialized S-Works Camber Carbon
The Camber frame has always sat on the XC/trail bike borderline. There's plenty of stiffness and enough plush and neutral suspension for pushing hard on the Roc's long, rutted and rocky descents, but it's still reasonably light, and keen steering lets you attack technical, twisting gullies and sketchy step-up climbs.

SRAM RISE 60 carbon wheels
The latest XC/trail hoops from SRAM use a pressure-formed hookless carbon rim to create a hard carving yet super-light 1,430g 29er wheelset (1,390g for the 650b version). They're relatively cheap for top-spec carbon, at around £1,700 when they become available to buy this spring.

Quarq XX1 crankset
All the simple chain-retaining joy and carbon-armed goodness of SRAM XX1, with full wireless wattage measuring for ultimate training tuning feedback.

SRAM XX1
SRAM's revolutionary single ring/monster cassette transmission needs no introduction. The ultralight, never-skip-a-beat shifting is even more appreciated when you're pinning it down technical trails through a race pack or punching up a do-or-die climb to drop a swearing Frenchie.

RockShox Reverb Stealth post
Not standard issue for cross-country racing, but RockShox's benchmark dropper post was an absolute essential for taming some of the seriously steep and sketchy Roc d'Azur descents.

Garmin Edge 500
Garmin's neat GPS nugget puts full distance done/to go and speed data, plus heart rate and Quarq wattage information right under your nose without any irritating wires.





Guy and Alex enjoying the *bonhomie* and not being the slightest bit competitive

whom we never fail to catch up within a couple of minutes on the next climb – or couple of seconds if it's a descent.

Coming through!

A fresh stream of deeply tanned, vein popping riders on Specialized Epics, Cannondale Scalpels and Scott Sparks indicates that the front riders of the next wave are carving their way through. My wattage and heart rate info shows I'm on the right pace to finish as a reasonable ambassador for SRAM rather than crawling over the line as a puke-stained snivelling wreck though, so I resist the urge to jump their train.

The field is thinning out as we get further into the race, so we're getting longer singletrack descents before we run into traffic. The harder I hit stuff, the more the RS-1 seems to like it, and with the saddle dropped and my SRAM Guide brakes modulating beautifully, I'm getting away with what seem like borderline suicidal overtakes with control to spare. The trails are getting more radical too, with super-steep, ball-shrinking mogul fields making us scrape shorts on tyres as we try to dodge terrified racers tripod-ing into oblivion.

A big doubletrack descent sees us ripping past a couple of riders as though they're stood still. Then again, maybe they knew about the hub-deep river crossing round the next bend, which we hit hard enough to send a wall of water clean over our heads. As we drip dry in the sun on the following dusty climb, it's a far cry from the weather back home.

Papal approval

Even with our steady strategy cramp is starting to gnaw at our calves, and dropping into the 42-tooth crawler cog of our SRAM XX1 transmissions becomes an increasingly regular refuge on increasingly steep and technical ascents. The RISE 60 wheels still feel like a tailwind every time we reach a climb though, and I'm determined to make the most of my equipment advantage.

As we get nearer to the coast the crowds begin to grow again, and we charge to the summit of the signature wall climb past hundreds of cheering supporters including a pope and other less blessed fancy-dress cheerleaders. A concrete slab climb out of a village nearly does for Alex and I'm getting regular Taser jabs in my legs as I grind to the top of an evil steepening singletrack gully, but with the sea below us, it's all downhill once we get to the last food stop.



"Pah! Zis descent is for pussies!" Guy comes over all local



"Go on, my son!" Or, that's what we thought he said, anyway

While it might be "Merci!" to the cake and banana crew, it's 'no mercy' to anyone in our way on the swerving singletrack drop down to the sea. While I've kicked a lead out of Alex on the last climb, it doesn't take long for him to punch past me, so I engage beast mode and launch my Camber across a do-or-die gap to set off in hot pursuit.

If panting past the pope wasn't surreal enough, the final part of the course is weird in a way only the French seem capable of. We duck under a bridge on a pontoon of metre-square floats, down alleyways to the sea wall, across the beach outside a cafe, over another wobbling water crossing, then time-trial it into the final swerving section of hop-and-pop singletrack. It would've been fantastic seeing the top pros duelling through here before the final sprint, but that was over an hour ago so we tame our egos enough to finish as we started, side by side and grinning.

Rolling back to the SRAM truck and racking our bikes up for the race mechanics to clean and prep while we grab some food and a quick rubdown is the final part of our pro experience. It's a far cry from fumbling around in the back of a car in the drizzle of a British field, and a brilliant end to a brilliant event.

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH GO Outdoors SURLY Sarma

THE ROAD TO ROVANIEMI

With less than a month until our intrepid duo hit the frozen trails of Finnish Lapland, they explain how their race preparations are coming along

Words Matt Orton **Pics** Various

At the time of writing this, there's exactly one month to go until Tom and I line up on the start line for the Rovaniemi 150, a 150km race through Finland's subarctic wilderness by foot or bike. And by bike, we mean fatbike – snow is the natural habitat for big rubber. While Finland boasts perfect fatbike riding conditions, the same can hardly be said of the UK, occasional cold snap excluded. So how can you train for an extreme race in average conditions? We've opted for putting plenty of miles in, a bit of friendly competition, oh, and riding to work on probably the least efficient commuting bike ever... »

THE LOWDOWN

ROVANIEMI 150



This unique winter race through Northern Finland's subarctic landscape starts and finishes at Lapland's main city, Rovaniemi

LOCATION ROVANIEMI, FINLAND
DISTANCE 150KM
TIME WITHIN 42 HOURS
DATE 20-22 FEBRUARY 2014
ENTRY FEE €250
REGISTRATION BY 31 JANUARY 2014
WWW.ROVANIEMI150.COM



These are the kind of frozen conditions the boys can expect – with no singing snowmen in sight



Matt's been doing his best to make his fatbike even heavier



Matt's been turning plenty of heads on the daily commute



Loneliness has a new name... bikepacking



Matt Orton

MBUK's weirdy beardy deputy art editor is a self-confessed fatbike addict who's more at home under canvas than in a hotel and spends his holidays hiking alpine routes, wilderness canoeing and riding his bike into the back of beyond. Grrr... manly!

With a month to go, I don't think I've ever been fitter. That isn't saying much though, because I'm still paying for an unhealthy university lifestyle that carried over into real life for quite a few years. It was only after hitting 30 that getting fit became a priority.

Fitting training in around a working lifestyle is never easy. The important thing is to spend as much time in the saddle as possible and make every mile count. With this in mind, my trusty singlespeed has been relegated to the back of the shed and my long-term test bike and Rovaniemi race bike, the Surly Ice Cream Truck Ops, has been my one and only bike for every occasion – including my daily commute of 24 miles. Sticking with the deeply-treaded Nate tyres and dropping the psi for added drag may have added a few minutes to the ride to work but it's paying off. Throwing in some longer rides at the weekend has given my endurance a much needed boost too.

The biggest test of my training was taking part in the Bear Bones Bikepacking Winter Event (www.bearbonesbikepacking.co.uk), which involved two days of riding and wild camping in mid Wales. It proved to be a great opportunity to test ride a fully loaded fatbike and rack up some miles. Some serious headwinds and cold, short days meant I never got too comfortable and added to the challenge – you can read more about my experience on our blog at **bit.ly/1E5gVXF**.

Confidence is running quite high at the moment. I'm feeling fit and I know I can manage the distance. I'm realistic about my chances – I won't be breaking any records and know there are going to be far more serious racers taking part, but I think completing the race in a respectable time is an achievable goal. I'm aware that could all change once I reach Lapland though. As several other first-time snow racers I've spoken to in the past few weeks have said, none of us really knows what to expect once we hit the snow. Which makes it all the more exciting.

Pic: Simon Toplak

IN ASSOCIATION WITH GO Outdoors

GEAR HIGHLIGHTS

Snow-specific riding kit is pretty thin on the ground, especially here in the UK. Luckily there's plenty of gear for other winter activities that should work just as well in the saddle as out of it. Here are a few key items of clothing GO Outdoors have supplied us that should help see us through the worst the Arctic can throw at us.



Marmot Thermo 1/2 Zip baselayer

Sweating in sub-zero conditions is seriously bad news. This thermal layer uses a mix of two different fibres to wick moisture away quickly and keep you dry without compromising warmth.

£95 (£51.30 with discount card)



Montane Sabretooth softshell jacket

Wind and cold are likely to be the worst elements we'll face, and they'll probably be combined. This softshell is designed to shrug off wind and water while remaining breathable and unrestrictive.

£175 (£157.50 with discount card)



Montane Terra Stretch pants

The ideal partner for the Sabretooth jacket, these trousers offer the same level of wind and water resistance and won't restrict movement thanks to the 4-way stretch fabric and articulated knees.

£85 (£76.50 with discount card)


Tom only just survived the Strathpuffer. How's he going to cope in Finland?



Tom Marvin

Our sister mag *What Mountain Bike*'s tech ed spends most of his time thrashing trail bikes around the country but he's always on the lookout for interesting races. Having tested his mettle in the Trans Nepal and Cristalp Grand Raid, he can't wait for the Rovaniemi 150. OK, maybe that's not quite true...

When we first signed up for the ~~Arctic Death March~~ Rovaniemi 150 it was all jovial, backslapping, "you'd better get some training in then, eh!" type banter, laughed off with witty retorts of how long we had to prepare for it and how short 150km is. All of a sudden it's got serious – heck, I even got my turbo trainer out over Christmas.

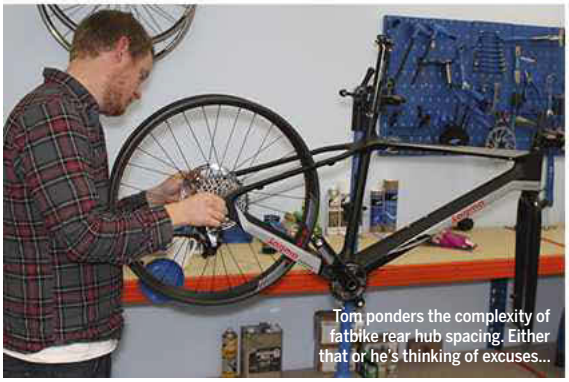
I've spent hours awake in bed coming up with scenarios of being stuck in whiteout conditions for 30 hours, fighting off bears and wolves with the Gerber knife my girlfriend got me for Christmas. I've been cold before, but I've never had to sign a disclaimer signing my life away to frostbite, psychological trauma and quite possibly being the first fully cryogenically preserved human being in history.

The first kick in the backside was our trip to GO Outdoors, where we selected the kit we'd need to race in. Their outdoors expert made no bones about the fact that -20˚C is really, really bloody cold. This was reinforced by a chat with one of the UK's foremost long-distance mountain bike racers, John 'Shaggy' Ross, a veteran of the Rovaniemi and Iditarod, its big Alaskan brother. If it does get as cold as it could (-30˚C), things will get serious very quickly.

With this in mind, I've been getting out on the bike whenever possible, as well as making the most of *BikeRadar*'s turbo sessions on YouTube. I've also spent a fair amount of time out in the wind and rain on bike tests and photoshoots, preparing, psychologically at least, for being cold for hours on end with not enough food.

Come January, I made my annual pilgrimage to the Strathpuffer 24. Northern Scotland can get pretty gnarly in winter – it might only be a few degrees below, but the wind is known for chilling you to the bone. Ideal conditions then for a 24-hour race. I raced in a team of four, which meant 40-minute bursts of seeing-red effort, followed by two-and-a-half hours of, quite literally, chilling out before heading out again.

Between laps it was a case of wrapping up warm – softshell trousers, baselayer, jumper, and doubling up on insulated jackets – and huddling as close as possible to a fire. Come lap time though, clothes were shed. Lycra shorts or 3/4s with waterproof baggies over the top were more than enough below, while a baselayer and jersey up top kept me from overheating. During the night we split the team in half and rode back-to-back laps while the other pair slept so we could all get a few hours' kip. It was tough and our times suffered, but come daybreak, with just a few hours left, our team spirit lifted and we managed to finish second.


Tom ponders the complexity of fatbike rear hub spacing. Either that or he's thinking of excuses...

IN ASSOCIATION WITH Sarma SURLY



TOM'S SARMA SHAMAN

Tom's bike for the race will be a carbon Sarma Shaman. We caught up with company CEO Dmitry Shindyakin to find out more about the brand and bike.

***MBUK*: Tell us about Sarma Bikes...**

DS: We're a global company but we're strongly influenced by Siberia, where several of our founders grew up. During very long winters with lots of snow fatbikes have a big advantage, and we fell in love with them from the first ride. Siberia is the best place to develop and test fatbikes, with average winter temperatures well below –18°C. We're all about state-of-the-art design and handcrafted products, and are attempting to be one of the leaders in innovation to expand the advantages of the fatbike platform.

Why use carbon fibre?

Everyone knows carbon is lighter and stiffer than aluminium. There's a huge aircraft plant close to my house in Irkutsk and most of my neighbours and friends work there. Good connections in this field helped me find specialists with corresponding expertise.

Tell us about the Shaman...

The Shaman is designed specifically for racing. Its geometry, stiffness and weight are optimised for fatbike or even cross-country races. It's a full-carbon bike, designed around our Naran 80mm carbon rims, and is light, strong and responsive. Our 69-degree head tube angle is purposely slacker than others, which along with the ultra short 445mm chainstays makes for a frame geometry that racers will love. A mix of Sarma products and SRAM components makes for a bike weighing less than 10kg (22lb). That makes it closer in feel to a standard 29er but with all the fatbike's advantages. It's perfectly suited to most adventure races, where you don't need to carry bulky luggage.

What's so great about fatbikes?

They're a lot of fun and you can ride where others can't. They're great on snow, frozen lakes, and so on. But the big tyres also act like a small amount of suspension, giving a huge level of grip and extra confidence on beaches, rocks, roots and anywhere where conditions are loose and rough. We see a lot of people riding fatbikes year-round and as their only bike. They've already carved out a niche and following. How big they're going to become, we don't know, but they're here to stay.

Find out more about the bikes the guys will be riding on the *MBUK* blog – www.mbuk.com

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- CHAINLINE – 49MM
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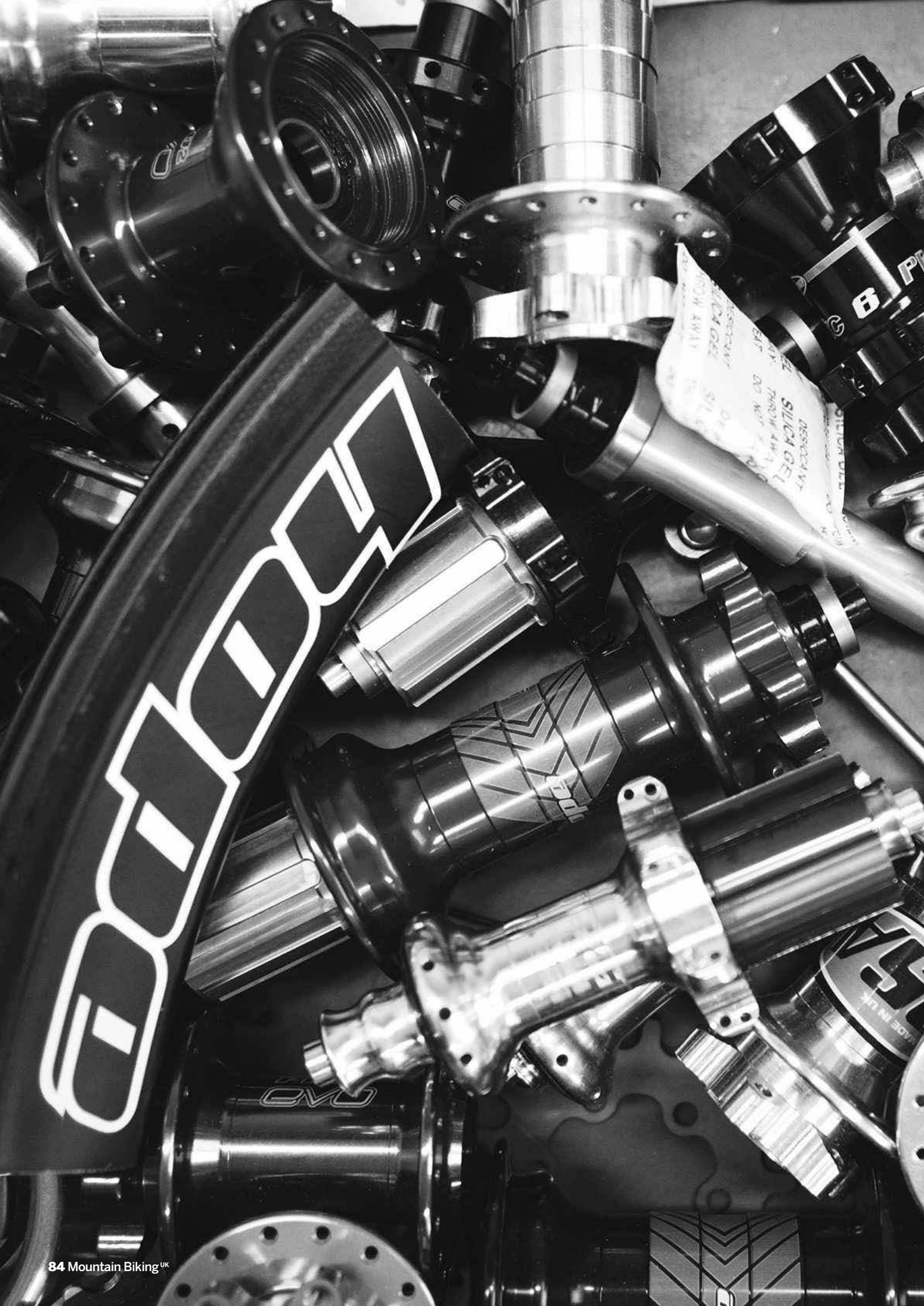
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HOPE & GLORY

Big things are happening in the sleepy Lancashire town of Barnoldswick, where Hope Technology have been busy working on some major new projects

Words Olly Forster **Pics** Sam Needham

An institution of British manufacturing, Hope are known and loved throughout the mountain biking world for their beautifully machined disc brakes, hubs and a plethora of other homegrown products. For 2015, they'll be bringing out something completely new – their first set of cranks. And with talk of carbon parts in the pipeline, we decided it was time to pay them a visit...

Hub of industry

Barnoldswick sits on the Yorkshire/Lancashire border, nestled among the Pennine Hills, with Manchester and Leeds an hour in either direction. This place has a quintessentially English charm and character – just like the businesses that call it home.

Negotiating the steep and narrow roads, it's hard to miss the industrial heritage all around. Manufacturing built this town and still plays a large part in everyday life here – Barnoldswick has the highest proportion of people working in industry anywhere in the UK. Bed brand Silent Night are based here and so is Rolls-Royce's jet engine business, which is where the Hope story starts. Co-founders Ian Weatherill and Simon Sharp are both former Rolls-Royce employees who left to follow a dream that would ultimately lead us here, to Hope's massive factory and HQ.

> With glass cabinets rich with brand memorabilia and old bikes on display, this is a bike geek's dream

Pulling up outside the front door, we're greeted by a building that looks anything but a state-of-the-art factory, but the big, green, glowing sign outside tells us this is the right place. The building was formerly a printworks, and its previous owners spent a fortune renovating it – £300,000 on the huge foyer alone. With plasma TVs playing videos of Hope's racers, framed photos of riders and employees past and present, glass cabinets rich with brand memorabilia, and a history lesson in mountain bike design courtesy of a number of old race bikes on display, this place is a bike geek's dream come true.

The scale of Hope's operation becomes evident as we pass »

Hope Technology timeline

1985
Ian Weatherill and Simon Sharp leave Rolls-Royce to set up their own business, IPCO, making jigs for local aerospace companies.



1989
Ian and Simon create cable-operated disc brake callipers for their mountain bikes.



1990
IPCO move to an 11,000ft² factory in Colne, Lancashire, called the Hope Shed. The name is later changed to Hope Mill.



1991
Hope Technology is set up to sell the cable disc brakes. They also release their first hub, which uses a six-bolt disc mount pattern (not the one used today) and sealed cartridge bearings.



1992
Fourteen Hope brakes – every set in existence – appear on bikes at the Interbike trade show in the US. They launch the Shimano compatible Ti-glide rear hub and invest in their first CNC machine.





The guys who started it all – Simon Sharp (left) and Ian Weatherill



Forged alloy crank arm blanks ready to be CNC machined



How many British companies can boast their own pump track?



Hope brakes in the making – trays of disc rotor spiders



HOPE'S NEW CRANKS

Coming soon to a shop near you...

Use: All-mountain, enduro, heavy-duty XC
Weight: 641g (claimed, inc. 32t direct-mount ring, no BB)
Axle diameter: 30mm
Key features: Expanding-spline axle interface, CNC machined arms, splined mounting system for spiders and direct-mount chainrings

Chainring options: Direct-mount single ring (26t to 36t Hope Retainer Ring) or removable spider with single, double or triple chainrings
Arm lengths: 165, 170, 175mm
Colours: Initially just black
Price: £245 (arms, axle and spider)

through various offices full of staff busy behind their prototype-strewn desks. Leaning up against the walls are seriously tricked-out Santa Cruz Nomads, V10s and Specialized Enduros, alongside road and cyclo-cross bikes of all shapes and sizes – all of them with custom Hope graphics and parts. This is no ordinary company, and their own version of the Government's Cycle to Work scheme is similarly next-level.

Bikes on the house

"The problem was that the staff in sales and design had access to all the best bikes through their industry contacts, but the guys on the shop floor were still riding around on their trusty old bikes," says Ian. "I wanted to make sure everyone had access to the best bikes, so several years ago I decided no one was going to be allowed to own a bike and instead we'd supply every member of staff with a bike – or several – fully kitted out in our parts, whether they were just riding to work or competing in races every weekend." There are now 250 bikes in Hope colours under their 116 staff, and with a net worth of close to £1 million, you know that when these guys tell you they love bikes, they're not kidding.

Not only do Hope have one of, if not *the*, best staff bike schemes in the UK, they also have a pump track for their employees to ride in their lunch breaks. The original track was designed and built by team rider and FEST Series chief lunatic Nico Vink a few years ago, but the British elements and a factory full of riders left it badly in need of a facelift. It's been replaced with a new 60m track made from a blend of tarmac berms and special gravel, with the sides landscaped to make it look like it's grown out of the ground.

1993

Machined skewers are introduced to go with the Hope hubs.



1994-1995

Hope launch their first hydraulic brake – an 'open' system. They also release their Big'un hubs.



1996

C2 brake with thumbwheel pad adjuster launched. Rob Warner wins a World Cup on Hope brakes. Pro riders sponsored by other brands use Hope products with logo covered up.



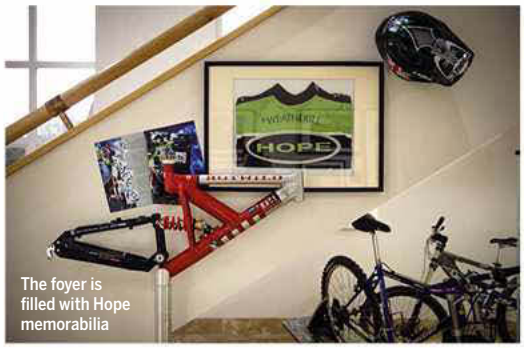
1997-1998

Titanium bottom brackets go into production. Pro lever is launched. Hope move to Barnoldswick and triple the factory size.




Old-school Hope hubs and brakes are proudly displayed


The factory floor is filled with high-tech CNC machines (and low-tech yellow buckets)



The foyer is filled with Hope memorabilia



The staff pool table. There's also a full size snooker table


Hanging out with Alan Weatherill in the enormous foyer

With 17 berms, 18 main jumps and six big rollers, it offers riders of all abilities a variety of lines to pump and jump through. And with some dirt jumps and a wallride already planned, and even talk of a singletrack loop around the lot, there's far more to come.

Made in the UK

As we pass the huge staff room, complete with both snooker and pool tables, and enter the factory floor, the contrast with the outside world hits us – we've gone from quiet, rural surroundings to an ultra modern manufacturing facility filled with huge Japanese CNC machines, lathes and laser cutters and grinders, all busy making virtually everything in Hope's line-up. "We buy in rims, bearings, brake pads, brake hoses and all the seals, which accounts for only around five per cent of the parts used," says marketing manager Alan Weatherill. "The rest is all machined here from the 250,000kg of raw material we buy in each year."

Even the internals of Hope's lights are made locally. "The circuit boards are designed to our specification and assembled up the road, about 20 miles from the factory," says Alan. "And the plastic battery cases are moulded 10 miles away. We do import the bare lithium-ion batteries and connectors, but all the parts are soldered together and assembled right here in Barnoldswick."

All Hope products go through the most stringent of tests in-house too, with a number of rooms just off the factory floor packed with machines that can detect the most minute imperfection. The company's quality control team test every element of every product, ranging from appearance to toughness.

Cranking things up

It's an important year for Hope, and one that'll see a product that's been hotly anticipated finally hit the shops – their first crankset. As we wander around the factory, production of the new cranks is in full swing, with huge milling machines turning forged alloy »

Hope have a pump track with 17 berms and 18 jumps for employees to ride in their lunch breaks

1999

Steve Peat comes second in World Cup series and wins National Champs on Hope brakes. Every rider in the national top 10 is also using them. Launch their lightest brake, the XC4.



2000

New Bulb hub accepts both 20mm through-axles and quick-release skewers. Four-piston DH4 brake reaches production after a year of prototyping on Peaty's GT DHi.



2001

"If you don't have discs then you're at a disadvantage," claims Elite cross-country rider Paul Lasenby after his first race on the newly launched Minis. Hope hubs with the new International Standard six-bolt disc pattern are launched.

2002

Hope launch their first headsets, complete with UK-proof stainless bearings and plenty of seals, along with the Head Doctor headset tensioner and Grip Doctor bar end plugs.



2003

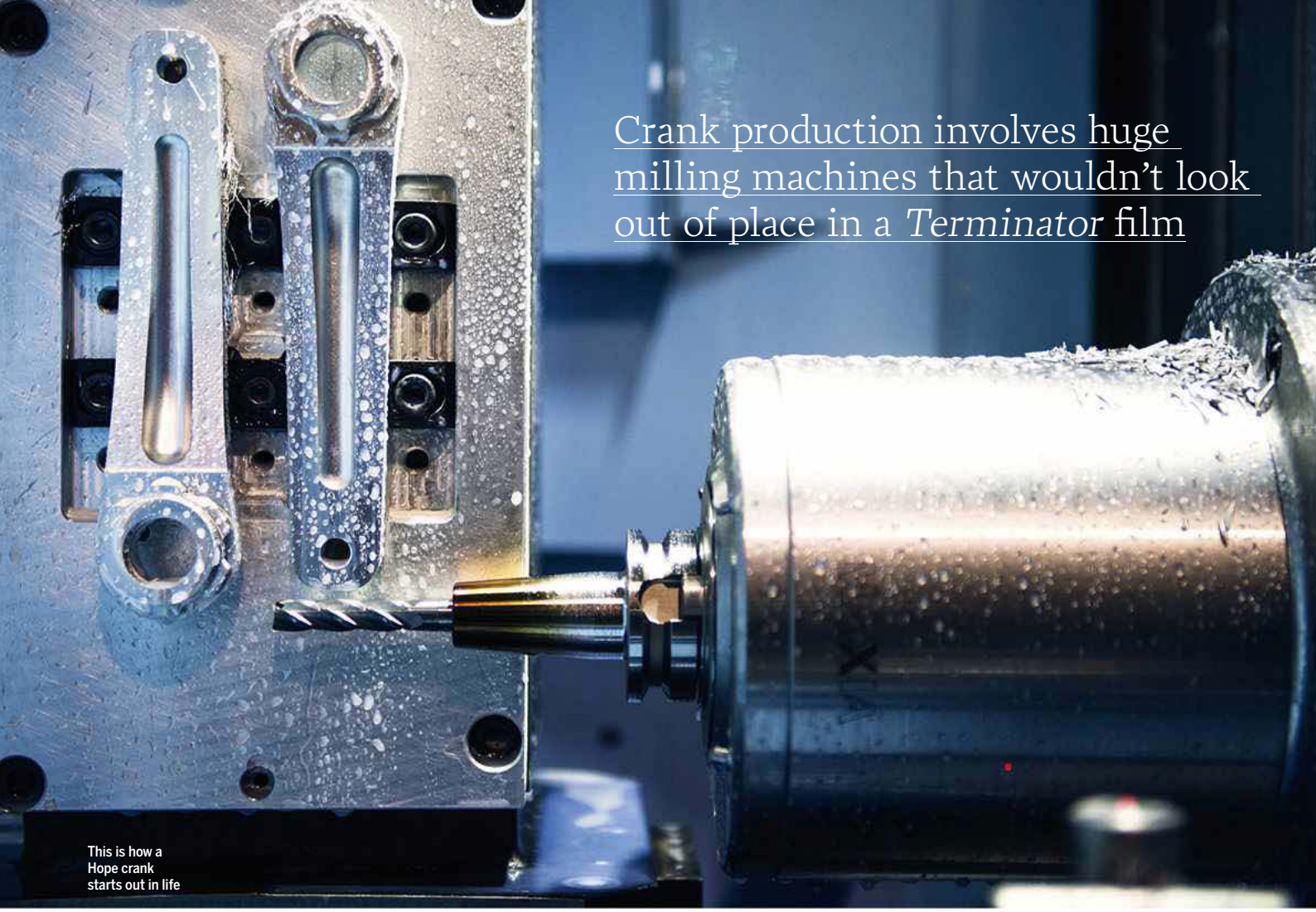
The one-piece Mono6ti brake arrives. Based on motorbike stoppers, it has six titanium pistons. The Mini and M4 brakes are switched to the stiffer one-piece calliper design.



2004

Sh1t Shifter cleaner launched.





Crank production involves huge milling machines that wouldn't look out of place in a *Terminator* film

This is how a Hope crank starts out in life



PINNERS ON THE PAYROLL

Team riders and talented staff

Hope choose their team riders carefully, looking for racers who can give specific feedback. As well as their own Hope Factory Racing downhill, enduro and XC teams, they also supply kit to the likes of Red Bull Rampage champ Andreu Lacondeguy. There are some pretty hot riders among the staff too. "We have Paul Oldham in R&D who won the National XC Series last year and has also been national CX champion," says Alan Weatherill. "Matt Rushden, one of our CNC machinists, races DH, coming second in Expert at a British Downhill Series race last year. Rachael Walker, who looks after marketing duties, raced DH at the highest level and has now moved over to enduro, finishing in top positions in her first races. And Woody Hole, who runs the assembly and dispatch departments, was no slouch in his day either, with top 20 finishes on the DH World Cup scene. He's just discovered enduro too."

blanks into beautifully CNC machined crank arms.

Hope tested three axle and arm designs over a seven-year period before settling on the final design, with its unique expanding-spline axle interface. Alan explains: "Cranks using splines often use a taper to ensure a snug fit. Once the arms have been taken off and on a few times, the spline becomes worn so they suffer from movement and annoying creaks. Our cranks are pulled on to a conventional spline, then we fit a tapered plug inside the axle that can be tightened every time the arm is refitted, giving a perfect fit every time." This system required the development of a proprietary tool for fitting the cranks, which also needed designing and testing. One comes in the box with each crankset.

The crank arms are CNC machined from forgings to give them, in Alan's words, "immense strength and stiffness". The production process is a wonder to behold, involving a symphony of huge milling machines that wouldn't look out of place in a *Terminator* film moving materials around in the most orderly fashion while filling the air with the strangely intoxicating smell of milled metal and cutting fluid.

Rise of the robots

The process starts with a custom made, cold forged, 7000 series aluminium blank. This is fed into one of the huge four-axis horizontal milling machines, which first machines the outside profile of the crank and then creates the thread for the pedal. The arms are then loaded on to a five-axis vertical milling machine, which finishes the splines, while also ensuring that the pedal thread is square to the axle. A machinist loads and unloads the machines, but they

2005

Hope introduce XC and freeride stems.



2006

Vision HID headlight launched.



2007

Moto V2 brake introduces the first vented disc for bicycles. Twin-LED lights and full wheelsets added to the range.



2008

More lights introduced, along with external bottom brackets. Hope move to even bigger premises – this time 56,000ft².




Impact testing simulates a rider stamping on the pedals


The staff bike stable is full of thoroughbreds


Measuring and testing tolerances – all new Hope products are checked and checked again


Hope wheels have a well deserved reputation


Hub blanks, ready to be machined into shape


Ground walnut shells are used to 'wash' parts

can run unmanned for many hours thanks to robots that are able to choose the tools needed for each action.

The finished crank arms are washed in ground walnut shells to remove any imperfections and loaded on to jigs by hand ready for anodising. The anodising process takes between 30 and 90 minutes depending on the colour – the deeper the finish, the longer it takes. The arms are then laser etched with the all-important Hope logo before being packed into boxes ready for dispatch around the world.

A new Hope

From the designers, engineers and machinists to the testers, team riders and everyone in between, there's an underlying vibe that ripples through Hope's fabric. "Hope are different!" says marketing manager and team rider Rachael Walker. "We're like a little family who all love riding bikes. Some prefer trail riding, some DH, XC, road or CX, and some prefer motorbikes. Whatever it is, it's a love of all things bikes and adventure that brings us all together and creates a common bond. We're not very corporate," she adds. "The boardroom is the least used room in the building. Most of the big decisions are made in the kitchen over a brew and toast."

With the cranks now ready, Hope are ready to sink their teeth into some new projects – one of which is suitably next-level. "We've bought a six-acre site 500m from our factory where we're building a 200m indoor velodrome track," says Alan. But it's what's being built underneath that really catches our attention... "On the second floor is the track, but below it will be a new R&D and carbon production facility."

Alan didn't want to give away any details, but did admit that handlebars would likely be Hope's first carbon product. Until now they've stuck exclusively with aluminium, so this new focus on composites, combined with their existing manufacturing skills, is sure to produce some exciting results.

"Products and projects happen because we want them to and we're passionate about them," concludes Rachael. We can't wait to see what Hope come up with next...

2011

Pro 2 EVO hub arrives. Hope fund and build the red-graded Hope Line at Gisburn Forest trail centre.



2012

Hope move into current 89,000ft² premises. F20 flat pedal launched. Martyn Ashton uses Hope wheels for his *Road Bike Party* video – the only damage is one puncture.



2014

Hope buy a six-acre site so they can expand their factory – and house their planned velodrome.



2015

After years of prototyping and hundreds of 'spy shots', the Hope crankset is finally launched.



TOOLED UP

Hope's magic machines

From a single CNC machine back in 1992, Hope now own 60 of these super-expensive tools. This enables them to continue production 24 hours a day. Their brake callipers and master cylinders are made using five-axis CNC machines, with three-axis machines used for sprockets and rotor centres, and lathes with driven tooling used for hubs, axles and spacers. Larger parts are made on huge Japanese machines, while some of the smaller parts are made on Swiss lathes that are also used in the watch industry. In 2013 Hope sold 25,000 wheels, 20,000 brake sets and 50,000 hubs. They anodise 100,000 components each week.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN® BICYCLES



The Rocky Mountain **Out of The Wilderness Demo Tour**

Visiting these locations near you

Haldon Forest
Exeter, Devon
Sunday 22nd February
10:00am to 4:00pm

Cardinham Woods
Bodmin, Cornwall
Saturday 28th February
10:00am to 4:00pm

Forest of Dean
Coleford, Gloucestershire
Sunday 29th March
10:00am to 4:00pm

Leigh Woods
Bristol, Avon
Sunday 5th April
10:00am to 4:00pm

Eastridge Woods
Pontesbury, Shropshire
Saturday 11th April
10:00am to 6:00pm

Cycle Highlands
Ballater, Aberdeenshire
Sunday 18th April
9:00am

Innerleithen
Innerleithen, Peebleshire
Saturday 25th April
10:00am to 4:00pm

Love the ride®

Ae Forest 7Stanes
Ae, Dumfries
Sunday 26th April
10:00am to 4:00pm

Contact us at **Info@rockymountainuk.com** *for more info*

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P110 BIKE TEST

TRAIL HARDTAILS

- Vitus Sentier VRS
- Pinnacle Ramin Five
- Genesis Latitude 20
- Orange Crush AM

PLUS

100 SIX OF THE BEST
Riding glasses rated

103 MBUK MACHINES
Introducing our new rides

126 GROUP TEST
2015's best disc brakes

MBUK Ratings

WE BASE OUR SCORES ON VALUE FOR MONEY AND PERFORMANCE

★★★★★ **EXCEPTIONAL:** A genuine class leader

★★★★☆ **VERY GOOD:** One of the best you can buy

★★★☆☆ **GOOD:** It'll do the job and do it well

★★☆☆☆ **BELOW AVERAGE:** Flawed in some way

★☆☆☆☆ **POOR:** Simply put, don't bother!

MBUK WINNER
The best product on test in terms of quality, performance and price

MBUK VALUE
An exceptional product for the money – you're getting a fantastic deal

MBUK MOST WANTED
A truly outstanding product, regardless of the pricetag

FIVE REASONS WHY OUR TESTS ARE THE BEST

01 Our test team is made up of the most respected bike and kit testers in the world

02 We have unrivalled knowledge and experience

03 We spend a vast amount of time and money making sure we get it right

04 We care more about telling you the truth than anyone else anywhere!

05 We are not influenced by PR or advertisers



HOW WE TEST

Detailed product check in the *MBUK* workshop

Strip and rebuild, checking for potential problems and improvements

Hit the trails... hard!

Test in real riding conditions till we know everything there is to know about the product

Re-test product with another tester

OUR TESTER TEAM

Our two main bike testers, Guy Kesteven and Seb Rogers, have tested more than 3,000 bikes between them over the past 20 years.

Our testing is headed up by Technical Editor Rob Weaver, who gets new products in as soon as they're available and coordinates all the testing through our vastly experienced band of testers.

OUR TESTS ARE

- Relevant
- Comprehensive
- Independent
- Fair
- Accurate

MBUK

WRECKED & RATED

Brand New Kit

MBUK Test Team



Rob Weaver

With two decades of riding and racing experience, Rob knows what works and what doesn't



Andrew Dodd

Doddy tests masses of kit every month. He has high standards and high expectations



Olly Forster

Gravity loving Olly has been riding long enough to know what he wants and won't settle for second best



Guy Kesteven

Our ultra experienced northern test engine is the ultimate exposer of kit that doesn't measure up



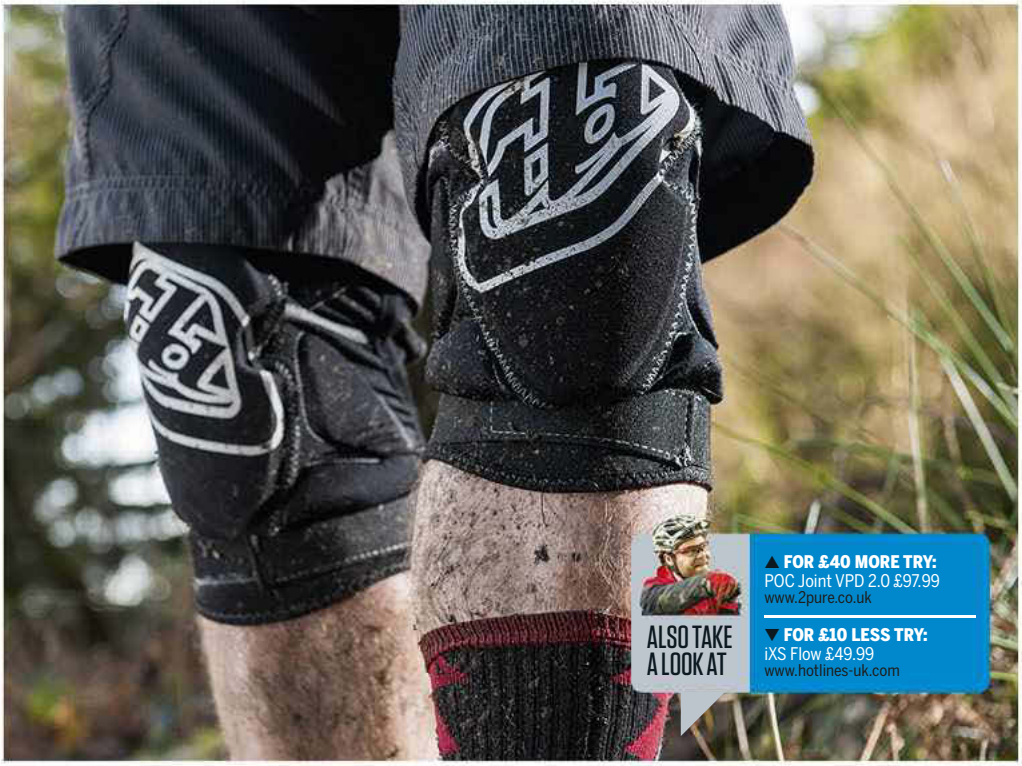
James Blackwell

Short and fast, pinned or binned, Art Editor Jimmer has been testing kit longer than he'll happily admit to



Jake Ireland

Jake spends every day riding, and his injury list proves he's pushing the limits to provide the very best testing



ALSO TAKE A LOOK AT

▲ **FOR £40 MORE TRY:**
POC Joint VPD 2.0 £97.99
www.2pure.co.uk

▼ **FOR £10 LESS TRY:**
iXS Flow £49.99
www.hotlines-uk.com

Troy Lee Designs T-Bone II knee pads

£59.99 Fisher Outdoor Leisure www.fisheroutdoor.co.uk

THE T-BONE IIS are, unsurprisingly, the second iteration of these popular knee pads from Troy Lee Designs. This time around they've been made lighter and more pedalling friendly.

The low-profile pads are held in place by two adjustable Velcro straps – one up top, one at the bottom – along with an upper strip of silicone. Everything is held together by a vented, stretchy sleeve, which helps to prevent bunching and movement when you're turning the cranks. There's a large, memory foam knee cup to take the hits head on, and additional padding either side of the knee to take on any awkward knocks too.

The T-Bone IIs have a snug fit. We thought they might be too tight initially, but once on the trail, comfort was excellent thanks to the ergonomic fit of the knee cup. Shift around on the bike, hammer the pedals, sweat like crazy and they stay just where they need to be. Their low weight and the level of protection on offer means they're definitely more suited to trail riding than full-on downhill racing though. **OLLY**

MBUK

A great set of trail riding pads for the money. Extremely comfortable and hard to fault

RRP Enduroguard mudguard

£8.99 Extra UK www.extrauk.co.uk

THIS SIMPLE BIT of kit from RRP has proven itself to be impressively effective and a real bargain at just under £9. The Enduroguard is quick and easy to fit with the supplied zipties, and, usefully, can be fitted to the fork or rear triangle. Up front it does a really good job of keeping crap out of your face and your fork seals clean. It doesn't offer the same level of protection as some of the longer, more expensive offerings out there, so you'll still get the occasional mud splatter and some spray getting through. But it deals with the bulk of crud impressively well, leaving your vision pretty much clear. **ROB**

MBUK

MBUK VALUE





ALSO TAKE A LOOK AT

▲ **FOR £1.196 MORE TRY:**
ENVE M60 rims on Chris King hubs
£2,495 www.saddleback.co.uk

▼ **FOR £899 LESS TRY:**
Specialized Roval Traverse Fattie wheels
£400 www.specialized.com

Ibis 741 carbon 650b wheelset

£1,299 **2pure** www.2pure.co.uk

WITH A HUGE 35mm internal/41mm external rim width, these are the biggest non-fatbike hoops on the market and, along with their 29in bigger brothers (the 941s), are designed to offer more tyre support and allow far lower tyre pressures to be used without sacrificing ride feel or stability.

Carbon fibre construction means they weigh just 1,660g a pair – especially impressive when you consider how wide these monsters are. Like a few other new rims out there, the 741s are 'hookless', meaning they lack the bead hook of a conventional rim. This has allowed Ibis to make the sidewalls much thicker than usual, creating a rim that's far more resistant to the kind of hard impacts that can damage other carbon designs. This also means less chance of tearing the tyre sidewall when you pinch it hard. Though the lack of a hook to hold the tyre bead in place concerned us initially, we've had zero burping issues and now have complete faith in the system, even at hilariously low pressures.

The 741s are laced up with 32 spokes on own-brand hubs fitted with Enduro bearings and they'll accept a 15mm axle up front and 142x12mm out back (or QR via adapters). Both conventional and XD Driver freehub bodies are catered for, and they come complete with rim tape and tubeless valve stems. Every tyre we installed inflated and seated first time, though some were very hard to mount.

The extra width affects tyre shape quite a bit – we found squarer tyres like the Maxxis High Roller II ended up with too much of an edge, whereas the wider rims worked perfectly with rounder tyres like the Maxxis Minion DHR II, Schwalbe Hans Dampf and Mavic Crossmax Charge. It's worth noting that a 2.25in Hans Dampf will inflate to roughly the same size as a 2.35in tyre on a conventional rim.

With standard tyre pressures, the wheels are immensely stiff and rough terrain can transmit buzz to your hands. But let a bit of air out and the 741s come into their own. We ventured as low as 17psi, and found immense traction without burping the tyres or suffering unpredictable carcass roll. We spent a good deal of time clattering them into rocks and roots, and came out the other side with nothing more than a few minor scratches.

These wheels genuinely change the behaviour of your tyres. They're strong and light, and considering the price and construction quality, they're good value compared to other carbon wheels too. **DODDY**

MBUK

Strong, stiff and light. The wider rim profile helps to improve tyre grip, comfort and stability dramatically

MBUK

WRECKED & RATED

Brand New Kit

PRODUCT NEWS

Turning suspension upside-down

It looks like Öhlins may be branching out into the mountain bike fork market. The Swedish suspension specialists worked with Specialized to create the highly acclaimed TTX shock, and Spesh tester Brad Benedict and World Cup racer Robin Wallner have now been spotted riding a prototype inverted downhill fork. With 30 years' experience in motorbike suspension, there's no doubting the Swedes' expertise. Keep an eye on www.specialized.com.

Landing soon...

French pinners Loris Vergier and Loic Bruni have been spotted sporting 100%'s first full-face downhill helmet. This new lid, known as the Aircraft, should be available later in the year. From what we can see, they've included plenty of venting, aggressive angles



and a neck-brace-friendly tapered rear. More details soon. For now, head to www.decade-europe.com.

Evil's wagon wheels

The Following is the first 29er to break out of the Evil Bikes stable. Its 120mm (4.7in) of travel is controlled by the same Delta suspension system used on the 26in Evil Undead – a single-pivot set-up with some clever linkages to maximise pedalling efficiency and bottom-out resistance. With a slack 67.2-degree head angle, short 430mm chainstays and a full-carbon frame, it should be serious fun! More info at www.silverfish-uk.com. »





Speedplay Brass Knuckle pedals

£134.99 **i-ride** www.i-ride.co.uk

THE BRASS KNUCKLES are properly chunky and back up their looks with some serious brawn, weighing in at 420g for the pair. But what exactly does your £135 get you?

The 10 specially machined pins per side are easy to bolt in using the included socket tool, and the platforms are comfortable for all but the widest of feet. Grip isn't particularly great though, especially in damp conditions.

In the dry they're OK but the raised area above the axle sits at almost the same height as the pins so they don't cup your feet like more concave pedals. Though the knuckleduster-like design will appeal to some, the 'finger holes' soon get clogged up with mud, meaning grip suffers even more.

It's a shame about the grip issues because even after six months of riding the axles are still spinning smoothly and we've only had to use the built-in grease ports once. **JAKE**

MBUK ★★☆☆☆



O'Neal Winter gloves

£34.99 **O'Neal** www.oneal.eu

THESE WINTER GLOVES from O'Neal use a thin, insulated palm that doesn't feel too bulky when gripping the bar and doesn't get in the way of shifting gears or braking. There's next to no bunching either, thanks to the decent fit and minimal bulk. The windproof and water resistant backing does a great job of keeping your hands warm even on really cold, wet days. If it's really pouring with rain the O'Neals will keep the wet out for a while, but before long things will start getting pretty damp. That said, they'll still keep you warm. Not everyone will like the lairy graphics though. **ROB**

MBUK ★★★½☆

Deity T-Mo Enduro handlebar

£130 **Hotlines** www.hotlines-uk.com

DEITY HAVE A great reputation for downhill and dirt jump bars but this Tracy Moseley signature steering stick is all about the enduro. At 212g and £130 it's mid-pack for a premium quality, mid width carbon bar, although it's slightly narrower than most competitors at 735mm. What it lacks in width it compensates for in stiffness though, with none of the outer tip flex or bounce of some other 200g bars. That means you can tell exactly what your front tyre is doing (or how much more it can still do before you bin it), though you might wish you had a few less psi in it by the end of a long descent. **GUY**

MBUK ★★★½☆





WTB Vigilante TCS Tough/ High Grip 27.5x2.3in tyre

£46 Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

AT 1,112G, THIS soft-rubber version of the Vigilante with WTB's new Enduro casing really is hefty, meaning you'll probably want to run it tubeless. Luckily the Tubeless Compatible System bead makes fitting it a breeze.

Designed with sloppy/loose conditions in mind, it can feel draggy on climbs thanks to the sticky Gravity DNA rubber – we found it worked best paired with a faster-rolling tyre at the rear. The weight gives you some inertia to overcome on flatter sections too, but when it comes to hooking up ruts and catch berms on steep hand-cut terrain, the soft compound comes into its own. The widely spaced, tread clears well too, and after several months of abuse, there's still plenty of meat on the bones. **RIC**

MBUK ★★★☆☆

Five Ten Hellcat shoes

£105 Five Ten www.fiveten.com

THE ORIGINAL HELLCATS were Five Ten's first foray into clipless bike shoes, blending their renowned Stealth Rubber sole with a robust upper to create a design that ended up on its fair share of DH World Cup podiums. The new shoes keep the same sole and basic silhouette but are 70g lighter a pair (1,198g, UK size nine with cleats), helping to address one of our main gripes.

The fit, feel and quality of construction that made the Hellcats so popular first time around thankfully remain, while new materials used on the upper make them easier to clean and quicker to dry. The toe box now has a wipe-clean synthetic leather covering that fends off splashes, while the sides are thinner and more reluctant to soak up water.

Despite the diet they're still not the lightest shoes out there – Five Ten's own Impact VXis weigh 250g less for just £35 more. The positioning of the cleat shots, and the amount of adjustment available, is still less than perfect compared to newer designs too – we couldn't get the cleats quite far back enough for our liking. **OLLY**

MBUK

Significantly improved and still super-comfy, but weight and cleat adjustment could be improved upon

★★★☆☆



ALSO TAKE A LOOK AT

▲ **FOR £35 MORE TRY:**
Five Ten Impact VXi Clipless £140 www.fiveten.com

▼ **FOR £30 LESS TRY:**
Shimano AM45 £74.99 www.madison.co.uk

PRODUCT NEWS
Continued

Bikes, camera, action

Sony's latest action cam, poetically named the FDR-X1000VR, promises to deliver 4K (4x the resolution of 1,080p Full HD) filming in a lightweight, waterproof package. It'll also be able to capture 1,080p footage at 120 frames per second for super-slow motion playback. Setting it apart from the market-leading GoPro are Sony's SteadyShot image stabilisation system and a wide-angle 170-degree Zeiss lens, which should render it well-suited to making sense of those wild MTB moments. See the full camera spec at www.sony.co.uk.



Give damaged cranks the boot

SRAM have announced they'll be producing a range of crank boots – rubber sleeves that fit over your crank arms like socks – for their carbon cranks, the aim being to provide a means of protecting your carbon investment from rock strikes, without adding unnecessary weight. Head over to www.fisheroutdoor.co.uk for more on pricing.

Attack of the cones

Kali Protectives have launched a clever new trail/enduro lid called the Maya that incorporates an egg box shaped array of low-density EPS foam cones that fit into a higher-density outer layer. The inner layer is particularly soft, and the combination is designed to maximise energy absorption during an impact. The rear of the helmet drops down low for added protection. It also features an integrated camera/light mount and an antimicrobial liner to help prevent pongs. Pricing info can be found at www.nrg4.co.uk.





ALSO TAKE A LOOK AT

▲ **FOR £190 MORE TRY:**
Drift Ghost-S £329.99
www.actioncameras.co.uk

▼ **FOR £40 LESS TRY:**
GoPro Hero £99.99
www.madison.co.uk

Replay XD 1080 Mini action camera

£139.95 **DogCam Sport** www.dogcamsport.co.uk

AT JUST 85MM long and 24mm in diameter, the XD 1080 Mini is easy to miss. But it packs quite a punch, offering Full HD filming at a relatively low price.

Simplicity is the trade-off for the fact this camera costs over £200 less than top-end models from the likes of GoPro, Contour, Drift and Sony. The only adjustments are two small switches to turn the internal microphone on or off and switch between 1,080p (Full HD) and 720p (HD) quality. The XD can only film at 30 frames per second in 1,080p mode, so it's not great for slow-motion footage. That ups to 60fps in 720p mode. The sound quality from the internal mic didn't blow us away either. The picture quality is good in all but very low light though, and the bullet-shaped body is light and barely noticeable on a helmet.

Possibly the best thing about the XD is the inclusion of four mounts, which really boost its creative possibilities straight out of the box without demanding more of your cash. A neatly machined cam lever locks the camera in position once you've positioned the socket, so there shouldn't be any shaking to ruin your sweet edit. **HUW**

MBUK
Simple it may be, but this action cam is up to the job and won't cost you the Earth
★★★★☆

Works Components 2.0 Degree headset

MBUK MOST WANTED

£74.99 **Works Components** www.workscomponents.co.uk

UNLIKE CANE CREEK'S popular Angleset, Works Components' angled headset uses fixed-position cups (set at one, 1.5 or two degrees) rather than adjustable ones to alter your bike's head angle. This means it works out over £100 cheaper but is just as effective at altering your head angle.

The simplicity of this system is the key to its success. While the Angleset is a high-quality headset, it needs to be fitted with painstaking perfection to avoid creaking. In contrast, the Works Components headsets are easy to get lined up straight with your head tube thanks to notches in the cups, and the split crown race helps to make for speedy installation.

The AC bearings are tough and are sealed adequately for UK conditions. General finish of the headset is good, if a little chunky. It's UK made and performs flawlessly, allowing you to fine tune the ride of your bike. **DODDY**

MBUK ★★★★½





Hope AM/Freeride 35mm stem

£80 **Hope Technology** www.hopetech.com

WEIGHING IN AT 130g, this stumpy stem is machined from 2014-T6 aluminium at Hope's Lancashire factory and accepts a 31.8mm diameter handlebar. It's available in 0 and 20-degree rise options, and both 35 and 50mm lengths.

The broad handlebar clamp offers rock solid support for wide bars, and the faceplate is securely attached with four 4mm Allen bolts, with recommended torque settings etched by each bolt hole.

Our 35mm version feels stiff and has remained creak free even after months of hard use. It doesn't do it any harm that it looks bloody good too. **DODDY.**

MBUK ★★★★☆

USWE F4 Pro hydration pack

£99.99 **Decade Europe** www.decade-europe.com

USWE ARE RELATIVELY new to the MTB scene, but with a background in motorbikes and the likes of Steve Peat already on the sponsorship roster, we're expecting big things.

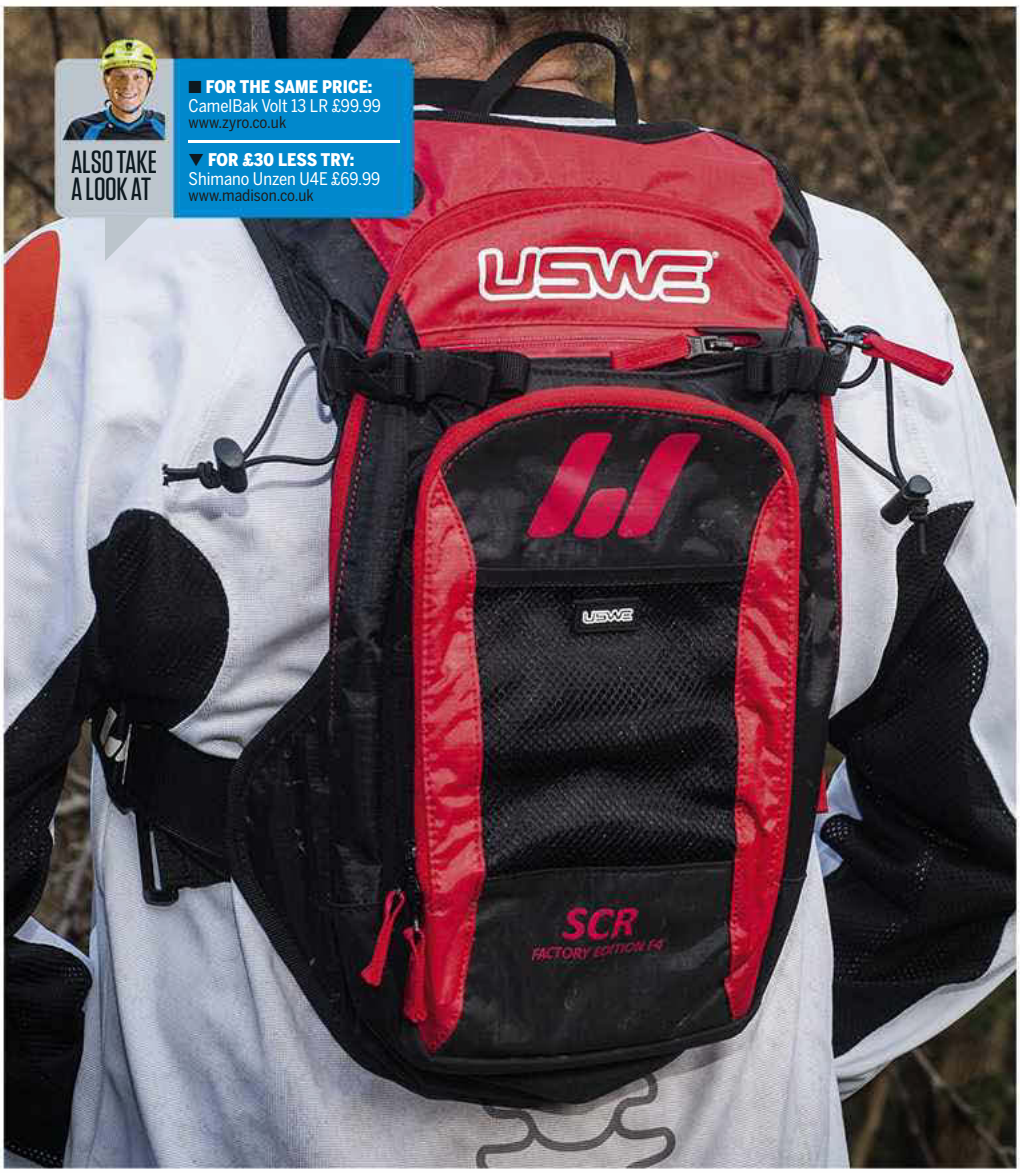
The F4 houses a 3l Hydrapak bladder, with an internal baffle to ensure you always get water when you need it and a lock on the mouthpiece to prevent leaks. The front of the bag will hold a full-face or open-face lid, making it ideal for enduro racing. There's a waterproof 'media' pocket as well as enough internal space and pockets for a day's riding supplies and basic tools.

The foam 'Airstrips' back panelling does a good job of stopping the F4 getting too sweaty. The pack's most unusual feature is the 'No Dancing Monkey' strap system, where the straps form an X shape across your chest and clip together at the sternum with a sturdy buckle. They're adjustable for different size riders and elasticated to allow for chest expansion while breathing. And they work as they should, keeping the pack from 'dancing' while you're riding – though some testers did find them a little restrictive when breathing heavily. **JAKE**

MBUK

Sturdy, well thought out pack with unique strap system that's worth trying before you buy

★★★½☆



ALSO TAKE A LOOK AT

■ **FOR THE SAME PRICE:**
CamelBak Volt 13 LR £99.99
www.zyro.co.uk

▼ **FOR £30 LESS TRY:**
Shimano Unzen U4E £69.99
www.madison.co.uk

MBUK

WRECKED & RATED

Brand New Kit

THE SMALL STUFF
MTB BITS AND PIECES



CHIBA DRYSTAR PLUS WATERPROOF GLOVES

£38.99 **Bob Elliot**
www.bob-elliot.co.uk

The Drystar Plus gloves are fully wind and waterproof but breathe surprisingly well. The fit of our medium pair was a little tight initially but they stretched after a few rides. The thickness slightly hampers you getting to your controls and it'll need to be very cold to warrant a glove so thick. JIMMER

MBUK ★★★☆☆



WORKS COMPONENTS SPIDERLESS CHAINRING

£43.99 **Works Components**
www.workscomponents.co.uk

Designed to replace the spider on SRAM GXP cranks, this narrow/wide chainring is machined from 7075-T6 aluminium and available in 26t-36t options. It hasn't dropped a chain once and is wearing well. DODDY

MBUK ★★★☆☆



BLACK MAMBA GLOVES

£20.40 (100 PAIRS) **2pure**
www.2pure.co.uk

These disposable nitrile gloves are a great addition to your toolbox. They're thick enough that they won't snag or tear easily, but thin enough to allow plenty of dexterity for intricate jobs. ROB

MBUK ★★★★½



RockGuardZ MudGuardZ Evo2 front mudguard

£39.50 **RockGuardZ** www.rockguardz.com

THE LATEST FRONT fender from carbon fibre specialists RockGuardZ boasts a new profile that's designed to control the way in which mud and water exit the mudguard more effectively. Rubber strips have also been added for a quieter ride.

As with the first-generation mudguards, it's easy enough to fit using the supplied cable ties. The new profile and rubber strips make alignment easier this time around though, which is a bonus. We fitted ours to an X-Fusion RV1 DH fork (which houses a 650b wheel fitted with a 2.35in tyre) and have had zero issues with mud clearance.

In gloopier conditions, the underside seems to benefit from the Flowcoat coating, which helps to prevent mud building up. When screaming down sodden trails and through puddles, we found the Evo2 very effective at keeping our goggles clear and face clean. **ROB**

MBUK ★★★★☆



Superstar Lithium Carbon handlebar

£69.99 **Superstar Components**
www.superstarcomponents.com

CHEAP AND CARBON are two words you rarely want to hear used together, but we've had no issues with this carbon bar from direct-sale specialists Superstar. At 780mm wide, it's both downhill and trail bike friendly, while cut marks mean it can easily be reduced all the way down to 700mm. Our test bar tipped the scales at just 253g uncut, making it only slightly heavier than bars costing more than twice as much. The eight degrees of backsweep place your weight a little further back than some more aggressively designed bars, but the familiar five-degree upsweep figure means it doesn't feel too different. On the trail it's stiff without being brutally so. **OLI**

MBUK ★★★★☆

Endura Xtract waterproof jacket



£54.99 **Endura** www.endura.co.uk

ENDURA'S LIGHTWEIGHT XTRACT jacket can be packed down to about the size of an orange, so it can be crammed in your pack and called upon when the weather turns.

The cut is good, with enough length in the sleeves to prevent them riding up when stretched out, and the dropped rear does a surprisingly good job of keeping spray and grime off of your bum.

We had no issues with the non-adjustable elasticated hem, but the lack of adjustment at the elasticated cuffs does make getting the jacket on or off over gloves less easy. The partially fleece-lined collar, reflective detailing and discrete zipped stash pockets are all nice touches, especially considering the relatively low price.

The Xtract shrugs off lighter rain showers with ease, while still managing to breathe reasonably well when you're working hard. When things get biblical though, we found we started to get damp after not too long. **ROB**

MBUK ★★★☆☆



BRAND NEW KIT

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▼ **FOR £30 LESS TRY:**
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Specialized 2FO Clip shoes

£100 **Specialized** www.specialized.com

SPECIALIZED CERTAINLY DID their homework when developing the new 2FO clipless shoes, packing them full of very effective trail features.

The outsole is made up of two different density rubbers. The red, softer section of the sole is made from the same 'SlipNot' rubber used on the flat pedal version of the 2FO for better off-the-bike traction, while the black section – dubbed the 'Landing Strip' – is slightly firmer to make it easier to slip your foot back into the pedal when clipping back in.

In practice, it works. Getting back into the pedal after a quick dab involves next to no scrabbling around or struggling to re-engage the cleat. It helps that Specialized have shifted the cleat slots further back towards the mid-foot than usual and extended them by 4mm. This makes the 2FOs good for downhill riding because it produces a more balanced stance once clipped in.

Other highlights include the tough, injection moulded toe bumper and the small elasticated LaceLock that stops your laces flapping about. Comfort is right up there with the best of them thanks in part to the Body Geometry footbed, and they're easily stiff enough for long trail miles without being uncomfortable.

While the air mesh material used in the upper helps keep things cool on hot days, it definitely doesn't help with keeping the cold and wet out come winter. On the plus side, they don't soak up water and dry quickly. At 1,040g (pair, UK size eight, with cleats) they're not exactly hefty either. **ROB**

MBUK

Comfy shoes with some great features. Definitely better suited to milder days in the hills though

★★★★☆

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Six of the Best

RIDING GLASSES

Why upgrade...?

"Decent clear or light-sensitive (photochromic) glasses that fit well and don't fog up – too often, at least – will make your riding far more enjoyable at this time of year. Here are six to choose from..."





£79.99

Lazer Solid State S1 Chrome Photochromic

Madison www.madison.co.uk

SO GOOD... Clarity through the photochromic lens is good and changes in light are dealt with in a subtle yet effective manner. The field of vision is uninterrupted, even right at the peripheries. Two large lens vents do a decent job of preventing fogging. The nose piece is very comfy and the rear half of each arm can be moulded to improve the fit.

NO GOOD... There's just one frame size and we found the Solid State S1s a touch on the tight side, even with the flexible arm tips bent as flat as possible. These glasses won't move while you ride but those with larger heads may find them uncomfortable.

MBUK ★★★☆☆



£74.99

Endura Benita

Endura www.endura.co.uk

SO GOOD... The Endura glasses' flexible, easy to mould arms help provide a secure, comfortable fit that's tight enough to ensure they don't move about but not so snug that they'll leave you with a headache. The rubber nose piece is flexible, and three vent slots either side of the nose stop it getting clammy. Lens clarity through the Benitas' photochromic lens is good and we like how quickly it reacts to changing light situations.

NO GOOD... Though the lens adapts quickly, it's darker than the other photochromic lenses on test in the same low light situations. It also has no venting.

MBUK ★★★☆☆



£150

Smith Optics Overdrive

Saddleback www.saddleback.co.uk

SO GOOD... The flexible arm tips and two-position adjustable nose piece help to make the Overdrives some of the comfiest specs on test. They're also the only full-frame glasses here, but luckily the deep lenses provide a good amount of coverage and you barely notice the lower part of the frame. Three lenses are included in the case and, thanks to Smith's innovative design, they can be changed with no faff in seconds. Lens clarity is good too.

NO GOOD... Although you get three lenses, £150 is still a lot of cash. There's no venting on the lenses either, which means they fog up quicker than some others.

MBUK ★★★½☆



£69.99

Tifosi Lore Light Night Fototec

Zyro www.zyro.co.uk

SO GOOD... Tifosi's Light Night Fototec lenses are beautifully crisp and clear. They also react subtly to changes in light, though not quite as quickly as the lenses on the Enduras. The large single vent in the corner of each lens ensures fogging is limited and disappears quickly. The flexible arm tips and easy to mould nose piece make getting the fit right easy and add to overall comfort.

NO GOOD... With less arm curvature than the other glasses here, the fit of the Tifosis isn't quite as snug on smaller heads. The lenses are also quite shallow so they don't offer quite as much in the way of coverage as others on test.

MBUK ★★★½☆



£79.99 (three-lens pack)

Madison Recon

Madison www.madison.co.uk

SO GOOD... Madison have more or less nailed the ergonomics here. The comfortably curved one-piece arms hug the head without feeling tight and have rubber grippers on the inside of the tips to prevent slipping, and the nose piece is soft and flexible. Another big plus is the six vent slots that run across the top of the lens and help prevent fogging. Coverage is good and the field of vision is usefully uninterrupted.

NO GOOD... Our frame has some grubby marks on it that we can't shift. Lens changes aren't as smooth as with some of the other sets here.

MBUK VALUE

MBUK ★★★★☆



£89.99

Spiuk Arqus

Silverfish www.silverfish-uk.com

SO GOOD... The Arqus specs come with three lenses, which are relatively easy to fit. Each gets the same four sizeable vent slots to help dump heat and prevent fogging. The arms have flexible tips and are curved enough to hug your head without feeling tight. The flexible nose piece is comfy and helps keep the glasses where they need to be. The field of vision is impressive and they offer a decent amount of coverage too.

NO GOOD... All we can really fault with these is the price – £90 is still a considerable amount of cash, even if there are three lenses included.

MBUK WINNER

MBUK ★★★★☆

T-130

TRAIL SUSPENSION 650b

New for 2015, the T-130 is the latest in a long and illustrious line of Whytes that let you go anywhere, ride anything and have maximum fun along the way. Boasting 130mm of QUAD-4 suspension travel, mid-sized 650b wheels and Whyte's groundbreaking trail bike geometry, the T-130 is fast and fun on the trails you ride from your front door, whilst never feeling out of its depth when you travel further afield, be it to the trail centres of Wales and Scotland or even the Alps.
However you like to ride, in the T-130 you'll discover a bike that's as versatile as a Swiss army knife, and that quickly becomes a trusted companion for a lifetime of adventure, wherever the trail takes you.



T-130 WORKS £2999 13kg



T-130 S £2299 13.5kg



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For more information – or to try one for yourself, contact your local Whyte retailer.

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MBUK Machines

We ride these long-term test bikes hard for a year, constantly scrutinising new kit, to bring you nothing but the truth about their performance



2015 SPECIAL EDITION

After a fond farewell to our 2014 bikes, it's time to welcome 2015's long-term fleet

What an exciting and eclectic year 2015 promises to be for mountain biking! We've done our best here at *MBUK* to reflect just that by ordering in some of the coolest, most exciting and interesting bikes the industry has to offer so we can put them through their paces over the course of the next 12 months and let you guys know just how they hold up. We've got quite an assortment in for 2015 too, spanning a good mix of wheel sizes, disciplines and price brackets.

There's everything from Guy's bang-for-your-buck, totally sorted Whyte T-130 trail bike to Matt's monster truck style Surly Ice Cream Truck fatbike, and a load of stuff in between. We've also got a few more bikes to introduce a little later down the line when they finally show up, so be sure to check in every month to see how we're getting on, where we've been riding and what we've managed to destroy so far.



The Phoenix has already reignited Rob's passion for downhill

ROB'S PIVOT PHOENIX

£2,700 (frame only) **Upgrade Bikes** www.upgradebikes.co.uk



Last year was a slow one for new downhill bikes. While there was a load of stuff happening at the World Cup races and behind the scenes, most of the bikes that were actually available for us to buy hadn't changed much since the year before. Why? Well, it was all to do with wheel size.

Once the racing began, it soon became apparent that very few teams were still using 26in wheels. And by the end of the season, most brands had announced either reworked frame geometry to accommodate the bigger 650b wheels or new bikes entirely. One such brand was Pivot.

We'd seen the new Phoenix under super-stylish young World Cup racer Bernard Kerr, but it wasn't until the end of the year that we were able to throw a leg over the bike ourselves. It may share its name with Pivot's previous downhill offering, but the geometry, frame material, wheel size and shock position all differ greatly. It still uses Dave Weagle's DW-Link suspension system out back but that's about it.

When the guys at Upgrade Bikes offered me the frame for the year, I jumped at the chance. Being the UK distributors for X-Fusion suspension, they were keen to stick the RV1 fork on too. Having ridden this out in the States when it was first launched, I was more than happy to oblige. Fortunately for me, as Bernard Kerr was delivering the bike he was able to offer some tuning advice, so in went a firm spring to ensure the RV1 doesn't use up its travel too easily.

One thing that was tricky when kitting the Phoenix out was finding a rear wheel with the right hub spacing. Because the Pivot uses a whopping 157x12mm rear axle, hubs aren't so easy to come by. Luckily Spank offer their Spike Race28 wheels with the right adapter kit, so it was a mad scramble to get these ordered and on to the bike as quickly as possible.

Since getting the Phoenix up and running I've been impressed with it from the off. The geometry is well balanced – I went for the medium frame – and has felt great on every track I've ridden so far. The long(ish) wheelbase helps keep things calm at speed, while the low bottom bracket means turns can be tackled with confidence.

It's been a while since I've been this excited about riding downhill, and the Phoenix has definitely reignited the DH fire within me!

SPEC

FRAME Carbon fibre, 204mm (8in) travel **FORK** X-Fusion RV1 HLR 27.5, 200mm (7.9in) travel **SHOCK** Fox DHX RC4 **DRIVETRAIN** Race Face SIXC cranks, Shimano Saint rear mech, shifter and cassette (1x10) **WHEELSET** Spank Spike Race28 wheels, Bontrager G4 Team Issue 27.5x2.35in tyres **BRAKES** Shimano Saint **BAR/STEM** CrankBrothers Iodine 11, 780mm/ Spank Spike Director, 35mm **SEATPOST/ SADDLE** Phoenix Team Carbon/ WTB High Tail Team **WEIGHT** 16.76kg (36.95lb) with pedals



The new Phoenix sticks with a twin-link suspension set-up, but it's all change elsewhere



Rob will be putting the X-Fusion RV1 HLR DH through its paces



The Myst has been thrown in at the deep end on some of New Zealand's top DH trails

SPEC

FRAME 6081 aluminium front end, carbon fibre rear end, 203mm (8in) travel **FORK** RockShox Boxxer RC, 200mm (7.9in) travel **SHOCK** Fox Van RC **DRIVETRAIN** Shimano Zee w/ Gamut P30s chain guide (1x10) **WHEELSET** Kore Torsion rims, sealed-bearing hubs, Maxxis High Roller 27.5x2.4in tyres **BRAKES** Shimano M615 **BAR/STEM** Kore Torsion, 800mm/ Kore Torsion direct mount, 50mm **SEATPOST/ SADDLE** Kore Torsion/Kore Fazer EX **WEIGHT** 17kg (37.48lb) without pedals

JAKE'S SARACEN MYST PRO

£2,999.99 **Madison** www.madison.co.uk



After borrowing Manon Carpenter's bike for some runs in Leogang (see issue 306), I was super-impressed with the redesigned Myst and its 650b wheels. To say I was stoked when Rob told me I was getting one for my long-term bike is an understatement to say the least! The timing was perfect too – it arrived just before I hopped on the plane to New Zealand for a couple of months of racing and travelling.

I went for the medium size and it fits a treat, though it does feel like a bit of a beast due to the slack head angle and bigger wheels. Luckily, that 'beasty' feeling doesn't take a lot of getting used to – you just need to give slightly more input through the handlebar in turns.

A RockShox Boxxer RC fork soaks up the bumps up front while a Fox Van RC shock is on duty out back. The Shimano Zee transmission is rock solid and reliable, while the M615 brakes are seriously impressive for a budget offering. Kore wheels and finishing kit set the bike off nicely.

My first ride aboard the Myst was at Coronet Peak, near Queenstown. The track at CP is flat-out and rough – the ideal place to bed a bike in and make sure the set-up is right! I found I needed a heavier spring at the rear and decided to fit the Charger Damper I tested for issue 312 in the fork to save my arms in the really rough stuff.

A couple of bolts worked loose on the first ride, but since torquing them up I haven't done anything but lube the chain during a solid week of riding. So far, so good, in terms of reliability then, and Mysty does feel remarkably sturdy. I'll be in need of some new brake pads soon though!

I'm looking forward to seeing if the 650b wheels really are faster than 26in on a downhill rig, and I'll have the perfect opportunity this weekend at an NZ national, though I'm pretty nervous at the level of competition – it seems like half the World Cup field is out here!



JAKE'S MERIDA ONE-SIXTY 7.900

£3,250 **Merida** www.merida-bikes.com

I was kept in the dark about my trail bike 'longer' for the year, so when the 160mm (6.3in) travel Merida turned up I was pretty stoked. It's got a RockShox Pike up front and a Monarch Plus out back to deal with suspension duties, the transmission is a mix of SRAM X01 kit and FSA cranks, Shimano XT brakes do the stopping and there's a Reverb Stealth dropper post bolted in too. For £3,250, it really is a lot of bike for the money! I'll be changing the handlebar for something with a bit less upsweep, and the chainring needs to go bigger too, but more about that next time!



Jake's looking pretty chuffed with his ride for the year!

MBUK

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Team Bikes



Jimmer's looking forward to putting some miles in on the Marin

JIMMER'S MARIN MOUNT VISION C-XM8

£3,500 **Paligap** www.paligap.cc



This year I'll be putting the Marin Mount Vision C-XM8 through the grinder. With 140mm (5.5in) of travel front and rear, a full-carbon frame, 650b wheels and neatly executed internal cable routing, it certainly looks the business.

Sizing proved to be an issue though. I'd initially plumped for a medium, but after slinging a leg over it in the car park, I soon realised it was far too small. A bit of measuring and internet research suggested that, like with last year's Norco, I'd have to size up to a large. I'll get into the detail next month when I've had the chance to properly put it through its paces.



The Whyte's going to be wearing plenty of test kit over the next year

GUY'S WHYTE T-130 SX

£1999 **Whyte Bikes** www.whyte.bike



Whyte's T-130 SX is potentially everything a modern trail bike should be – slack enough and with enough travel that you can get away with having more fun than you probably should, yet keen and efficient enough on the climbs that you can go and get yourself another helping as fast as you can. At under £2,000 for a spec that already includes a dropper post, it looks a bargain too.

What I'll be trying to do over the next 12 months is not only discover whether it lives up to its promise but also what tweaks make a noticeable difference. After the success I had creating cost-effective superbike slayers with last year's Giant Trance and Lapierre Zesty TR I'm determined to keep a tight rein on budget too.

That means I'm not immediately going to stick a Pike on instead of the Suntour fork and replace the own-brand Whyte wheels with a carbon set worth more than the whole bike.

I'm not saying it won't occasionally have some fancy bits fitted – after all, its primary purpose will be to act as a test rig for all the kit I'll be working through for reviews and group tests in 2015. But we've got a great reputation for being the magazine who give the budget guys just as much test time and credit where it's due as the big brands. Besides, wouldn't it be great if in a few months time we're saying, "Don't bother upgrading the fork or wheels – these are fine. Spend your money on a bike holiday that you'll enjoy way more"? That's the theory anyway, so let's see how it plays over the year ahead.

SPEC

FRAME 6061-T6 aluminium, 130mm (5.1in) travel **FORK** SR Suntour Aion LO-R CTS, 130mm (5.1in) travel **SHOCK** Fox Float CTD BV Performance **DRIVETRAIN** Race Face Ride cranks, Shimano Deore shifters, chain and front mech, Shimano SLX rear mech and cassette (2x10) **WHEELSET** WTB Frequency Team i19 TCS wheels, WTB Bee Line TCS 27.5x2.2in tyres. **BRAKES** Shimano Deore M615 **BAR/STEM** Whyte Custom, 750mm/Whyte Gravity, 70mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** X-Fusion HiLo SLS/Whyte **WEIGHT** 13.84kg (30.51lb) without pedals



GUY'S GT FORCE EXPERT CARBON

£3,500 **Cycling Sports Group** www.cyclingsportsgroup.co.uk

The launch of GT's original I-Drive suspension system was the cheesiest I've ever been on. They flew us into Las Vegas and up to a premier ski lodge where they literally revealed the bikes and components from behind a cloud of dry ice. Sadly our UK lungs meant the riding at 10,000ft didn't really live up to the "every trail faster" slogan. We also permanently scarred one of GT's top brass (sorry Mark) by forgetting to switch his brakes back to US standard, and the editor of another magazine ran off with two strippers the minute we got back to Vegas.

GT have persevered though and 16 years later their latest enduro bike is a genuine Force to be reckoned with thanks to Atherton tuned handling and crazy levels of AOS Independent Drivetrain suspension traction. It's already proving a ton of fun deep into the annual fork and wheel tests too, so I'm really looking forward to making the most of its unique character over the coming months.



JCW's hoping the Sherpa proves as helpful as its namesake on the climbs



JCW'S STANTON SHERPA 853

£500 (frame only) **Stanton Bikes** www.stantonbikes.com



I've got a soft spot for hardtails because that's what I grew up riding, plus they make great low-maintenance winter bikes, so I was keen to get hold of one for my first *MBUK* long-termer. It wasn't an easy task though.

My requirements were pretty specific – I wanted 29in wheels (I'm the least fit member of the team so liked the idea of the extra rolling speed, plus I was blown away by a ride on the full-sus Whyte T-129), an XL frame with a decent length top tube (I'm 6ft 2in and like to run a stubby stem) and a bit of suppleness rather than back-jarring rigidity. Basically, I wanted a longer 29er version of my steel Cotic Soul. Most frames I looked at were too short, too expensive, too burly or lacked standover room. But with a 648mm effective top tube, trail-friendly angles and a full complement of Reynolds chromoly tubing, the 21in Stanton Sherpa looked just the ticket.

UK-based Stanton offer a good value complete bike (£1,850) but, working in an office full of test kit, it made more sense to get hold of a frame and build it up myself. After the chassis, the wheels and fork are probably the most important bits of a hardtail, and particularly a 29er, where the extra diameter/length makes them more prone to flex. I settled on a set of Hope's new Tech Enduro hoops – overkill for XC riding, but with a 23mm internal rim width they'll let me run big tyres to take the edge off the hits and the Pro 2 hubs are easily serviceable. Up front, I fancied a change from the usual RockShox and Fox options so I opted for Marzocchi's suitably burly looking – and bargain priced – 320 LR. I'll keep you posted on some of my other kit choices over the next few months.

My first shakedown ride at the Forest of Dean highlighted the need for a couple of tweaks, but overall I'm really pleased with how the Sherpa's turned out.

SPEC

FRAME Reynolds 853, 631 and 525 chromoly steel **FORK** Marzocchi 320 LR, 120mm (4.7in) travel **SHOCK** N/A **DRIVETRAIN** Shimano SLX w/ Race Face Turbine Cinch cranks, absoluteBLACK 40t sprocket and lockring (1x10) **WHEELSET** Hope Tech Enduro wheels, Onza Ibex 29x2.4in (F) and Canis 29x2.25in (R) tyres **BRAKES** Shimano SLX **BAR/STEM** ODI Flight Control II, 750mm/ Gusset Magnum, 50mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** Race Face Turbine/SDG Ti Fly **WEIGHT** 12.47kg (27.49lb) without pedals

OLLY'S GIANT REIGN 27.5 1

£3,999 **Giant UK** www.giant-bicyles.com



I must confess to having never been that excited about Giant's more aggressive bikes in the past, primarily due to their geometry, which – in my opinion at least – lagged some way behind recent trends. They've really spruced things up on the big-hitters for 2015 though, matching their proven Maestro suspension system to all the right numbers that make up the kind of bikes I like to ride fast.

To get things roughly where I wanted them for the maiden ride, I cut the huge 800mm bar down to a more apt 760mm, swapped the stock grips for some thinner ODI lock-ons and attached a pair of Burgtec flat pedals. Initial thoughts? After six days on the Reign I know this much – it's fast, predictable and race ready if you are.

The no-nonsense alloy chassis, 65-degree head angle, adequate reach, low 340mm BB and short 434mm chainstays delivered smiles from the get-go, and the spec's going to prove hard to improve upon too. Schwalbe's awesome Magic Mary and Hans Dampf tyre combo is hard to upset no matter what the weather, while SRAM's superb X1 transmission, Guide brakes and Reverb Stealth post are all smooth operators. The RockShox Pike fork is one of the smoothest I've ridden and the Monarch Plus DebonAir shock is simply stunning. It's safe to say we've started off on the right footing!

At 5ft 10in, I often find myself right at the end of the recommended sizing range for medium bikes. While the Giant is no barn door, it's longer than most mediums and after a year wrestling a size large Kona Process, it'll be interesting to see what difference knocking a few millimetres off here and there makes. More on that next month.



Olly's wasted no time getting to grips with the Reign 1

SPEC

FRAME ALUXX SL aluminium, 160mm (6.3in) travel **FORK** RockShox Pike RCT3 Dual Position Air, 130-160mm (5.1-6.3in) travel **SHOCK** RockShox Monarch Plus RC3 DebonAir **DRIVETRAIN** SRAM XX1 shifter and rear mech, X01 cranks, X1 cassette and MRP AMg chain guide (1x11) **WHEELSET** DT Swiss XM 1501 SPLINE wheels, Schwalbe Magic Mary TrailStar 27.5x2.35in (F) and Hans Dampf PaceStar 27.5x2.35in (R) tyres **BRAKES** SRAM Guide RS **BAR/STEM** Giant Contact SL DH, 800mm/Truvativ Holzfeller, 50mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** RockShox Reverb Stealth/fi'zi:k Tundra **WEIGHT** 13.35kg (29.43lb) with pedals, RockGuardZ front mudguard and bottle cage



Matt's been getting in plenty of miles on the Surly ahead of his upcoming trip to the Arctic

MATT'S SURLY ICE CREAM TRUCK OPS

£2,199.99 **Ison Distribution** www.ison-distribution.com



Do not adjust your magazine! Your eyes do not deceive you. This is indeed one of those ridiculous fatbike monstrosities that you've possibly seen and likely heard on recent trips to your local trail centre. How did this tattooed-weirdy-beardy machine make it into the pages of *MBUK*? With quite a lot of persuasion, that's how!

Before I go any further I'd like to make you a promise. "I promise not to get all preachy and evangelical about fatbikes being the best bikes ever." Like all bikes, they have their pros and cons. But while many will focus on their negatives, I think that if you take the time to throw your leg over one you'll be pleasantly surprised at what they can actually do.

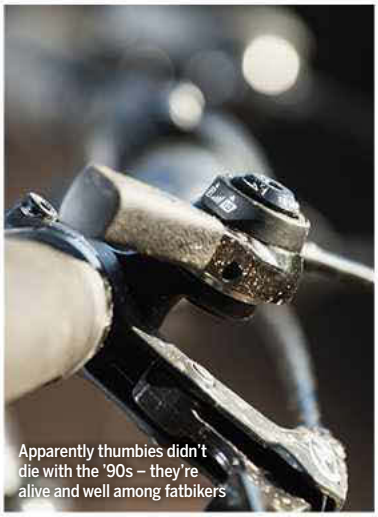
I've been long-term testing the rather good Travers Fat Race for our sister magazine *What Mountain Bike* for the past year, and I've really, really enjoyed it. I've ridden trails such as Penmachno and the Marin Trail in North Wales, the Verderer's at the Forest of Dean and Cafall at Cwmcarn, not to mention plenty of blue and red runs at BikePark Wales, and have been impressed by how well fatbikes handle and how much fun they are.

Surly may not have invented fatbikes but they can be credited with bringing them to the mainstream with their Pugsley back in 2003. The Ice Cream Truck is their latest offering and it comes in two iterations – one with beefy 5in tyres and this one with slimmer (only slightly) 4in tyres. It's less adventure orientated and more trail focused, with geometry influenced by Surly's '29+' Krampus, including a slack (in fatbike terms) 68-degree head angle and a longer top tube to allow for a shorter stem. Though it comes with an own-brand rigid fork, Surly designed the ICT to work with the new RockShox Bluto suspension fork and its 150mm hub spacing.

Things get a little weird with the brakes and transmission though. Stopping comes courtesy of Avid's BB7 cable-operated disc brakes, while the Shimano SLX derailleurs are controlled via microSHIFT thumbshifters. Yep, thumbshifters! At first glance this doesn't make much sense, but in the context of where this kind of bike is intended to be used, it does – cable brakes won't freeze in the snow and thumbshifters are easy to use when wearing bulky gloves. Initial impressions of the BB7s are really positive, though the 'thumbies' are a little less convincing on the trail. Pre-selecting the gear you want makes them workable but if you're used to quick, instinctive shifting, they're not ideal.



This thing's aptly named – everyone wants to flag you down, but for a quick go, not a 99 Flake



Apparently thumbies didn't die with the '90s – they're alive and well among fatbikers

SPEC

FRAME 4130 chromoly steel
FORK Surly Ice Cream Truck
DRIVETRAIN Surly OD cranks, Shimano Deore front mech, Shimano SLX rear mechs and cassette, microSHIFT SL-M10 thumbshifters (2x10) **WHEELSET** Surly Rolling Darryl rims on Salsa hubs, Surly Nate 26x3.8in tyres
BRAKES Avid BB7
BAR/STEM Salsa ProMoto 2, 740mm/HL, 80mm
SEATPOST/ SADDLE Kalloy SP-342/Velo VL2155 **WEIGHT** 16.93kg (37.32lb) with pedals

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MBUK

WRECKED & RATED

Bike Test

TRAIL HARDTAILS

£1,050-£1,300

TRAIL HARDTAILS

Words Seb Rogers **Pics** Steve Behr

Given the general all-round excellence of modern full-suspension trail bikes, why would you bother with a hardtail instead? There are three reasons. First, a hardtail gives you more kit for your money, because the budget doesn't have to cover a complex frame design and rear shock. Second, hardtails are lighter than similarly priced full-sussers, which means livelier handling on the trail. And third, with no pivot bearings to wear out, they're great for winter mud plugging.

In the hands of a good rider, there's not much a decent hardtail can't tackle. So we've rounded up four of the most promising looking hard-riding options on the market to find out which one deserves a closer look.

These bikes showcase a surprising range of approaches to cracking the trail hardtail nut – steel and aluminium frames, 650b and 29in wheel sizes, and fork travel from 120mm to 140mm. Which one is best for you will depend partly on what you're looking for, but our overall winner will need a blend of pace, agility and enough strength to take big hits and a few knocks in its stride. »



THE TESTER

Seb Rogers
Seb's long love affair with the hardtail shows no signs of ending, making him the perfect man to pick a winner from this bunch of trail-ready contenders.

THE LINE-UP



VITUS SENTIER VRS
£1,049.99



PINNACLE RAMIN FIVE
£1,100



GENESIS LATITUDE 20
£1,199.99



ORANGE CRUSH AM
£1,300



PINNACLE RAMIN FIVE

£1,100 *No-frills big-wheeler with added trail attitude*

SO GOOD

Big wheels and 120mm fork make light work of technical trails

Tidy handling and great component package

NO GOOD

Lacks the lively feel and sense of fun of the smaller-wheeled bikes on test

Evans Cycles' in-house Pinnacle brand brings big wheels to the masses with the Ramin hardtail range, which blends 29er hoops with various componentry packages on bikes costing from £500 to £1,500. The Five, at £1,100, sits just below the range-topping (you guessed it…) Six. With a 120mm (4.7in) travel fork and a 2x10 Shimano Deore, SLX and XT based transmission, it's an attempt to bring some trail attitude to big wheels. But does it hit the mark?

The frame

There's no attempt to reinvent the wheel (or even the frame) here, and the Ramin Five is all the better for it. Flaring subtly and almost invisibly at the bottom bracket and with a curved gusset up front for extra strength, the chunky down tube's circular cross-section reasserts the strength and weight advantages of round-profile tubes. The comparatively skinny, slightly ovalised top tube carries bolt-on cable guides rearward, while a slightly kinked seat tube puts both front mech and saddle where they need to be.

Out back the stays are curved enough to provide both mud and heel clearance. The dropouts have threaded holes for a rack or mudguard but, curiously, there are no matching eyelets at the top of the stays. The seat tube accepts a 31.9mm diameter post, opening up a plethora of dropper options (though there's no obvious way to route a remote cable). As stock though, the Ramin Five comes with a shimmed 27.2mm post – a deliberate move to increase rider comfort with a little seatpost flex. The 44mm head tube, which will accept any fork, adds further versatility.

The 120mm of front travel is served up by a RockShox Reba fork. Big wheels mean longer fork legs, and sometimes noticeably more flex, but the Reba can cope with 120mm – just – without descending into noodly whippiness.

The kit

It's disappointing to buy a bike only to find that there's a vital component that could really do with upgrading. So Pinnacle's approach – speccing Shimano kit for the bits that move and own-brand stuff for the parts that don't – is spot on. The understated Pinnacle rider contact points get on with the job without fuss, leaving more room in the budget for a Deore, SLX and XT based transmission driving Continental-shod wheels, all hauled to a stop with SLX stoppers and a big 180mm front rotor. It all just works, brilliantly – and that's the point.

The ride

Big wheels don't automatically lend themselves to the kind of aggressive trail riding that a mid-travel hardtail opens up – they're arguably more suited to fast-rolling trails and cross-country speed. Pinnacle's designers have given the Ramin Five relatively relaxed geometry in an attempt to make it more suited to technical riding, shifting the rider's weight rearward over the comparatively short stays to improve traction. Combined with grippy tyres and that slick shifting, utterly reliable transmission, the result is a bike that's capable of devouring rocky, rooty climbs. The skinny seatpost and stays provide a small amount of extra give for efficient seated pedal mashing, while big-volume Conti tyres roll up and over just about anything in their path.

It's a similar story dropping back down the other side of the hill. Once you're up to speed, there's not much that a 29in front wheel in a 120mm

JARGON BUSTER

Dropper post
Telescopic seatpost that can be lowered quickly to get the saddle out of the way for a steep descent.



THE PINNACLE IS CAPABLE OF DEVOURING ROCKY, ROOTY CLIMBS, AND IT'S A SIMILAR STORY DROPPING BACK DOWN THE HILL

Reba can't handle. We've always reckoned big wheels add about 20mm to effective suspension travel, and the Ramin lives up to that expectation. Fast, rocky descents are smoother and altogether less drama on this bike than on any of its smaller-wheeled rivals.

But this supreme trail devouring ability is also its Achilles' heel. Because, while it's incredibly efficient at what it does, it lacks what we can only describe as a sense of fun. We reckon this is down to the big wheels, which are inherently slower to turn because of their greater rotating weight. With its trail-friendly geometry and long fork, the bike wants you to throw it around. But the wheels say, "no, keep the rubber side down". The Ramin Five is caught between XC efficiency and trail hooliganism, and doesn't quite know which way to go.

Whether this matters or not comes down to your riding style. If you like to sit down and pedal, the Pinnacle will devour trails all day long. But if you use your upper body to tell your bike where to go – and like it to respond quickly – you might be better off with a smaller-wheeled bike. You pays your money... »

MBUK

An efficient trail-tamer, but those big wheels ultimately limit some of the fun

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GENESIS LATITUDE 20

£1,199.99 *Range-topping trail tamer keeps steel real*

SO GOOD

Steel-framed comfort in a nimble handling, well specced package

Spot-on geometry combines safe speed with fast-handling fun

NO GOOD

X-Fusion Velvet fork is good, but no match for the Orange's RockShox Revelation

JARGON BUSTER

26in
Standard wheel diameter for mountain bikes for decades, now mostly replaced by 650b (also known as 27.5in) and 29in hoops.

Genesis's line of 650b hardtails tops out with the Latitude 20, which stands apart from the other bikes here by virtue of its steel, rather than aluminium, chassis. A full complement of Shimano Deore components provides the 2x10 motive power and the means to bring it all to a halt, while X-Fusion's 120mm (4.7in) travel Velvet fork makes a refreshing change from the RockShox norm. The question is, can steel still cut it... and is the fork any good?

The frame

Back when boys were boys and jumpers were used for goalposts, steel was pretty much the only game in town for building bicycles. Once the bike industry had figured out how to build strong, light and durable aluminium frames though, steel fell out of favour. That's a shame, because it has a lot going for it. In particular, ferrous frame fans cite the tubing's comfortable ride (compared to many aluminium frames) as a good reason to stick with steel.

Genesis used to make extensive use of Reynolds' well-regarded tubesets for their steel MTB frames, but in place of the Midlands manufacturer's familiar logo is an unfamiliar "Mjölnir" sticker. It means "Thor's hammer", apparently, and it's Genesis's own take on the kind of double-butted seamless chromoly tubing that big brands like Reynolds specialise in... only cheaper.

Whatever the source of the pipework, it's put together thoughtfully. The 44mm head tube means you can plug just about any fork in there. It also provides a strong, rigid anchor for everything behind the fork, and it's backed up in the strength stakes by a pair of open-ended gussets to reinforce the top and down tubes. There's a set of Crudcatcher bosses under the down tube and a neat driveside plate linking the chainstays to the bottom bracket for extra mud and chainring clearance.

X-Fusion's Velvet fork is an interesting alternative to the ubiquity of RockShox's offerings at around this price. It ticks all the right boxes, offering a tapered steerer, 15mm axle and an air spring with adjustable compression and rebound damping.

The kit

Functionally speaking, a 2x10 Deore transmission is all you're ever likely to need. The I-Spec shifters and brake levers mount to a single clamp – a nice touch that keeps the bar area uncluttered – while own-brand finishing kit takes care of rider contact points in a straightforward, if unglamorous, way. Tubeless ready rims make it easy to ditch at least some of the rubber, while Maxxis's Ardent treads are bigger and floatier than their nominal 2.25in width might suggest.

Genesis list a 27.2mm seatpost on their website, but in fact it's 30.6mm. That's bad news for comfort – slimmer posts tend to flex more – but good news if you want to run a dropper, though you'll need some nifty cable tie bodging to run a cable to a handlebar mounted remote lever.

The ride

The Latitude has been around a little while, which means early incarnations wore 26in wheels. The move to bigger hoops has meant a bit of geometry shunting to accommodate more rubber. Luckily, all the things that made earlier Latitudes fun on the trail have survived the wheel size change intact.

Genesis's experience with trail hardtails shows through in the fantastically balanced geometry, which pulls off the neat trick of »



THE BIG WHEELS AND CHUNKY RUBBER BLEND EASY ROLLING WITH A DOSE OF THE FLICKABLE FUN THAT CHARACTERISED THE 26IN VERSION

feeling as though the wheels are hard-wired to your brain. Spot a line and you'll quickly find yourself on it, with no apparent effort.

The Latitude feels stable at speed, but the front end is still easy to pick up and place at will. The big wheels and chunky rubber blend easy rolling with a dose of the flickable fun that characterised the 26in version. And this is all served up with an added dose of steel-framed resilience that sets the Genesis apart from the mainstream competition. Noticeably less harsh than most aluminium hardtails, the Latitude skips its way through the rough stuff with a nonchalance that's inspiring.

If there's a weak link in the chain, it's the X-Fusion fork. While it's easy to set up, steers accurately and copes well as speeds increase, it never quite matches the benchmark set by RockShox's Revelation for all-round competence. It's by no means a bad fork and we don't regard this as a deal-breaker – especially as the Revelation generally comes on bikes costing a couple of hundred quid more – but there's no doubt that the Latitude's superb handling would be even better with a different bump eater plugged into the front. »

MBUK

The Latitude proves that steel frames still have a place, but it'd be even better with a better fork up front

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VITUS SENTIER VRS

£1,049.99 *Big-travel fork and XC comfort in all-round trail package*

SO GOOD

Low weight, great handling and comfy ride make for a fast, lively trail companion

Cross-country pace with genuine rock swallowing ability

NO GOOD

Manitou's Minute fork is improved but still no match for RockShox's Revelation

Cable routing for a dropper seatpost would be good

JARGON BUSTER

Butting
Process of varying tube wall thicknesses to shave material – and weight – from where it isn't needed.

The VRS heads up Vitus's four-bike Sentier trail hardtail range, which encompasses 650b and 29in wheel sizes and a range of specs to suit riders on a budget. Nudging just over the psychological £1k barrier, it combines Manitou's underrated Minute Expert fork in 140mm (5.5in) travel trim with a Shimano Deore, SLX and XT based component package. Aimed, Vitus say, at "fast paced, action packed epics", does it strike the right balance?

The frame

Big-travel hardtails have often tended towards big tube profiles and overt attempts at 'overbuilding'. Not so the Sentier, which boasts the kind of tube profiles that wouldn't look out of place on a contemporary cross-country (XC) race machine. Triple butting shaves weight where it's not needed and leaves metal where strength or stiffness could be an issue, while mechanical forming – a process that creates complex tube profiles – gives the top and down tubes their distinctive silhouettes.

Vitus's designers have clearly given plenty of thought to both comfort and strength. Up front a massive tapered head tube joins a flattened top tube and gently curved down tube, providing a torsionally stiff and strong anchor point for the rest of the frame. The chainstays become thinner on their journey from dropout to seat tube, hinting at a rear end that's intended to be efficient without being harsh. The detailing includes ISCG chain guide mounts but – curiously for a bike boasting a 140mm fork – no provision for dropper seatpost cable routing.

The Manitou Minute Expert fork, with its distinctive sloping crown and rearward-facing brace, offers 140mm of air sprung travel and a refreshing change from the usual RockShox and Fox offerings. Manitou's proprietary Hexlock quick-release 15mm axle is a huge improvement over earlier Minute forks' Allen bolt set-ups, though it's still not as intuitive or quick to use as the big name competitors' systems.

The kit

Own-brand finishing kit provides all the rider contact points, which means no spec sheet bragging rights but a well finished, functional set-up that should stand up to plenty of hard use. Big-flange Formula hubs laced to tubeless ready WTB rims make for a light, fast-accelerating wheel package and the WTB tyres provide great gobs of grip even in wet, slimy riding conditions. As for the stop-and-go kit, we've no complaints with the mix-and-match selection of Shimano Deore, SLX and XT parts that adorns the VRS. The clutch-equipped rear mech provides clean, snappy shifts even under power, while the 2x10 transmission simplifies gear selection and improves ground clearance below the bottom bracket.

The ride

Keen riders comparing the Vitus with its competition are bound to spot the most obvious difference – that Manitou Minute Expert fork. It's not a common choice, although both Manitou and the Minute have a long and distinguished history in mountain biking. It's an easy fork to live with, offering straightforward set-up and a surprisingly plush, well-damped feel throughout its travel.

The steering is accurate enough to see most rock gardens and roots swallowed up and spat out without drama, though there's more flex and flutter under hard braking than with the RockShox Revelation on the Orange



THE VRS RESPONDS INSTANTLY TO PEDALLING INPUT AND THE FLOATY, GRIPPY REAR END POSITIVELY REVELS IN BEING PUSHED HARD

(which admittedly contributes to that bike's £250 higher price tag). Combined with the Sentier VRS's relatively low weight, relaxed geometry and grippy but floaty tyres, this makes for an agile and speedy trail companion.

Long forks can make a hardtail feel wallowy and sluggish, but those aren't adjectives you could easily apply to the VRS. It responds instantly to pedalling input, while those comparatively slender stays work well with the big-volume rear tyre to produce a floaty, grippy rear end that positively revels in being pushed hard. Vitus claim the bottom bracket is deliberately low "to improve handling" but we found it high enough to allow for some aggressive pedalling through choppy trail sections without any risk of grounding.

So far, so inspirational. We love the idea of a bike that combines XC speed with genuine big hit ability, and the Sentier VRS delivers. Almost. Our only reservation is that, in situations we know a Revelation-equipped bike will just blast through, the Vitus's Manitou fork is marginally less confidence inspiring. It's not a huge difference and if you don't ride aggressively when the going gets tough it's far from a deal breaker. But still, we can't help feeling that Manitou's big-travel trail fork still lags a tiny bit behind the best. »

MBUK

The Vitus's combination of pace, comfort and big travel is compelling. It'd be even better with a better fork



FOR THE TRAIL BLAZERS

The popular Ramin 5 has undergone a refresh for 2015 including flat-welding and a new Rockshox Reba fork. And right now we're rewarding early riders with £100 of free kit with your new bike.

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ORANGE CRUSH AM

£1,300 *Budget all-mountain bruiser from stalwart UK trail meisters*

SO GOOD

Light enough to ride all day but tough enough to throw around

Great handling and a good blend of sensible components with no glaring flaws

NO GOOD

Low BB height means crank strikes are possible over rough terrain

Steep seat angle makes slippy seated climbs a tad trickier

JARGON BUSTER

Double and bash Crankset with twin chainrings and an outer bash plate to protect the largest ring from damage on trail obstacles.

Orange's hard-hitting Crush hardtail has been through various incarnations over the years. After an early outing as an uncompromising headbanger with big fork and monocoque frame construction, it's settled down to its current position in the Orange range – an all-mountain all-rounder, light enough to ride all day but tough enough to take a bit of abuse in its stride. The AM is the baby of the range. Is it worth the asking price?

The frame

The Crush's refreshing lack of shapeshifting tubes means it oozes a retro, no-nonsense appeal. Actually, that's not entirely fair – the down tube shifts slightly in cross section, from square-ish up by the massive head tube to oval-ish at the bottom bracket. But the rest of it is pure, unadulterated round or rectangular tubing, none of which appears to have been anywhere near a hydroforming machine.

That down tube forms a backbone that's plenty stiff enough to hang everything else off, reinforced by a chunky gusset up front to help keep the head tube where it ought to be in case of a hard frontal impact. The steeply sloping top tube almost – but not quite – forms an uninterrupted line into the fastback stays, which are welded ahead of the seat tube in order to improve tyre clearance. Square section chainstays help keep the rear wheel tracking true. Cables run neatly below the top tube, and there's provision to route the cable for a 'stealth' dropper post internally. ISCG mounts and a single set of bottle cage bosses complete the detail.

Plugged into the front is a RockShox Revelation RL Solo Air fork with 140mm (5.5in) of travel. It's a solid mid-range performer that'll keep most riders happy, combining enough travel to keep even the hardest riding of trail tamers rubber side down with plenty of steering precision.

The frame

Other price-equivalent hardtails manage to shoehorn a smattering of XT components into the spec list. The Crush AM's SLX and Deore kit doesn't have the same kudos, but it doesn't sacrifice anything in performance terms. And the double-and-bash crankset is the perfect set-up for a hard riding trail machine like this, giving a good spread of gears and massive amounts of ground clearance. It's good to see Orange didn't forget to fit a 180mm rotor up front too, for more consistent braking on long descents.

The ride

Orange have created a bike with a slightly unusual mix of slack head and steep seat angles. The relaxed front end and long wheelbase hint at big-hitting high-speed stability, while the weight-forward stance created by the steep seat tube and inline post are straight out of the cross-country race bike cookbook. But here's the thing – it works.

Pushing the rider's weight forward makes for an efficient pedalling position for getting the power down, and this is emphasised further by the wide bar, which shifts body weight even further towards the centre of the bike. A roomy top tube means there's plenty of room for this in spite of the stubby stem, giving plenty of scope for shifting weight backwards and forwards as trail conditions dictate.

The Crush's compact frame structure translates into instant get up and go. It's no featherweight, but much of the extra heft over more



THE CRUSH DEVOURS CHOPPY, ROCKY SECTIONS OF TRAIL AS THOUGH THEY'RE NOT THERE

cross-country biased trail bikes is in the fork – and it's the fork that's the Crush's secret weapon. Ride with your weight forward, hovering over the saddle, and the Revelation's accurate steering and implacable rock-swallowing ability allow the Crush to devour choppy, rocky sections of trail as though they're not there. The rigid rear end keeps up a constant chatter of trail feedback at slow to middling speeds without ever becoming harsh, but at high speeds it simply tracks accurately in the fork's wake.

We've just two minor niggles. First, the bottom bracket is low enough that we gouged the pedals on rocks occasionally. And second, steep and slippery climbs need some judicious rearward weight transfer to keep the rear wheel dug in, thanks to the steep seat position. But these are minor grumbles. While it lacks the all-out pace and grace of lighter trail machines, the Crush AM adds a great dollop of can-do fun to any trail ride. If you like to ride big, fast and hard, the Orange should certainly be added to your shortlist. »

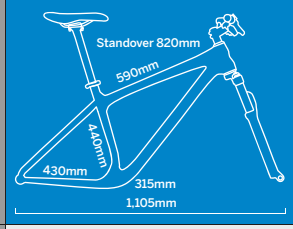
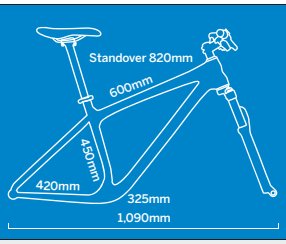
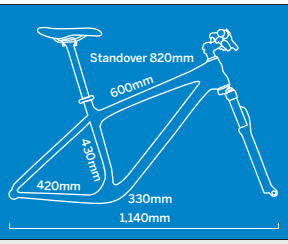
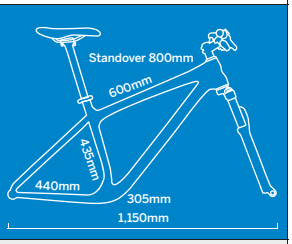
MBUK

Orange's trail-taming bruiser proves that a hardtail can handle seriously rough lines with ease

Bike Test
TRAIL HARDTAILS
£1,049-£1,300

THE SPEC DECK



	PINNACLE RAMIN FIVE	GENESIS LATITUDE 20	VITUS SENTIER VRS	ORANGE CRUSH AM
PRICE	£1,100	£1,199.99	£1,049.99	£1,300
DISTRIBUTOR	www.evanscycles.com	www.madison.co.uk	www.vitusbikes.com	www.orangebikes.co.uk
WEIGHT	12.3kg (27.2lb)	12.8kg (28.3lb)	12.3kg (27.2lb)	12.9kg (28.5lb)
FRAME	6066-T6 aluminium	Double-butted 4130 chromoly	6061-T6 aluminium	6061-T6 aluminium
SIZES	S, M (tested), L, XL	16, 17.5 (tested), 19, 20.5in	S, M (tested), L	S, M (tested), L, XL
FORK	RockShox Reba RL 29, 120mm (4.7in) travel	X-Fusion Velvet RL2, 120mm (4.7in) travel	Manitou Minute Expert, 140mm (5.5in) travel	RockShox Revelation RL, 140mm (5.5in) travel
HEADSET	FSA	FSA Orbit	FSA Orbit	Cane Creek
WHEELS	**Hubs:** Shimano Deore **Rims:** Alex Evo 2.3 **Spokes:** black, plain gauge **Wheel weight:** 2.2kg F, 2.8kg R (including tyres)	**Hubs:** Shimano Deore **Rims:** Alex Volar 2.3 **Spokes:** stainless, double butted **Wheel weight:** 2.0kg F, 2.6kg R (including tyres)	**Hubs:** Formula **Rims:** WTB ST i19 TCS **Spokes:** black, plain gauge **Wheel weight:** 2.0kg F, 2.5kg R (including tyres)	**Hubs:** Formula DC71 F, Shimano M525 R **Rims:** Alex MD23 **Spokes:** black, plain gauge **Wheel weight:** 2.0kg F, 2.7kg R (including tyres)
TYRES	Continental Mountain King 29x2.2in	Maxxis Ardent 27.5x2.25in	WTB Vigilante Race 27.5x2.3in F, WTB Trail Boss 27.5 x 2.25in R	Maxxis Ardent 27.5x2.25in
CRANKSET/ BOTTOM BRACKET	Shimano Deore M615, 24/38t/ Shimano	Shimano Deore M615, 26/38t/ Shimano	Shimano Deore M615, 24/38t/ Shimano	Race Face Ride, 24/36t/Race Face
DERAILLEURS	Shimano SLX F, Shimano Deore XT Shadow Plus R	Shimano Deore	Shimano Deore F, Shimano Deore XT Shadow Plus R	Shimano Deore F, Shimano SLX Shadow Plus R
SHIFTERS	Shimano Deore XT	Shimano Deore	Shimano SLX	Shimano Deore
CASSETTE/CHAIN	Shimano HG50, 11/36t, 10-speed/ KMC X10	Shimano HG50, 11/36t, 10-speed/ KMC X10	Shimano HG50, 11-36t, 10-speed/ KMC X10	Shimano HG62, 11/36t, 10-speed/ Shimano
BRAKES	Shimano SLX M675, 180/160mm	Shimano M447, 180/160mm	Shimano Deore M615, 180/160mm	Shimano M445, 180/160mm
BAR/STEM/GRIPS	Pinnacle, 720mm/Pinnacle SL, 75mm/unbranded lock-on	Genesis, 740mm/Genesis, 70mm/ Genesis lock-on	Vitus riser, 740mm/Vitus, 60mm/ Vitus lock-on	Race Face Ride, 740mm/Race Face Ride, 60mm/Strange lock-on
SADDLE/ SEATPOST	Pinnacle Sport MTB/Pinnacle	Genesis/Genesis	Vitus/Vitus	SDG Falcon/Race Face Ride
DIMENSIONS				
FRAME ANGLES	**Head** 68.5° **Seat** 70°	**Head** 67° **Seat** 71.5°	**Head** 65.5° **Seat** 72°	**Head** 66° **Seat** 74°
VERDICT	MBUK ★★★☆☆ **An efficient trail-tamer, but those big wheels ultimately limit any sense of fun**	MBUK ★★★½☆ **The Latitude proves steel frames still have a place, but it'd be even better with a better fork up front**	MBUK ★★★½☆ **The Vitus's combination of pace, comfort and big travel is compelling. It'd be even better with a better fork**	MBUK ★★★★½ **Orange's trail-taming bruiser proves that a hardtail can handle seriously rough lines with ease**

WHAT OUR SCORES MEAN: We give each bike one overall score to sum up how it performs and its value for money. If a bike gets a score of five, it really is the best you can get in terms of both

★☆☆☆☆ Poor: simply put, don't bother
★★☆☆☆ Below average: flawed in some way
★★★☆☆ Good: it'll do the job and do it well
★★★★☆ Very good: one of the best you can buy
★★★★★ Exceptional: a genuine class leader



MBUK WINNER
ORANGE CRUSH AM

FINAL VERDICT

With such a choice of frame materials, wheel sizes and fork travel, it can be hard to know what's going to work best. We like the Pinnacle Ramin Five for daring to be different, combining big wheels with a 120mm fork and geometry that's more trail than race. It's a good bike but the heavy wheels blunt the fun factor, and that's a shame.

Vitus's Sentier VRS doesn't have a weight problem. It's also well specced, a great price and handles really well, with enough fork travel to keep even the most adventurous rider happy. The Genesis Latitude 20 has a bit less travel and isn't quite such great value, but combines ride-by-wire handling with the lively feel only a steel frame can provide. Both are good bikes, but both would be better still with a better fork.

And that, ultimately, is why the Orange Crush AM is the pick of the bunch. Yes, it's the most expensive, but the kit is good, the ride sublime and the fork just keeps on going, whatever you throw in its path.

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WRECKED & RATED

Group Test

DISC BRAKES

We've tested 15 new and established anchors, from £23 to £290, to help you stop your bike on any budget

Words Guy Kesteven **Pics** Mick Kirkman



LEVER

The bit you pull to make the stopping happens comes in various shapes. Pivot positioning and adjustment dials can also change the way each brake feels.

ROTOR

The bigger the disc, the more leverage the brake exerts on the wheel. That means a 20mm increase in rotor size multiplies the power of a brake by 20 per cent. Bigger rotors are heavier though, and not compatible with some forks and frames.

BODY

The body holds the lever and clamps on to your handlebar. Some shapes sync better with shifters and suspension/dropper post levers than others. The body also contains the top-up fluid reservoir and the 'bleed port' for removing air.

CALLIPER

The business end of the brake contains one or two pairs of opposing pistons that squeeze the brake pads on to the rotor when you pull the lever. Slotted post mounts are standard but hose positioning and adjustment vary, as do size and weight.

PADS

These tiny pads work extremely hard to turn speed into safely controlled heat. Different brakes use different sizes, shapes and compounds, but some pads are cross-compatible and there are lots of aftermarket options for most brakes too.

What to look for

Which brakes will work best for you?

LIKE ANY UPGRADE, you first need to work out what you need/want from your brakes, compared to what you have now. If it's more power, then you might be able to get that just by upgrading to a larger rotor. If your brakes used to be fine but they've become unreliable, the levers or pistons are sticking, or they've lost power, don't assume you need new stoppers. A thorough service/bleed/pad change might get them back to full working order for a fraction of the price.

Even if your brakes have never felt great, it's worth reading the relevant reviews on *BikeRadar*. All the past *MBUK* brake tests are on there – which means there are reviews of pretty much every stopper imaginable – so it's a great way to see if your set is performing like it should or whether you've got a warranty case. If you definitely need fresh brakes but your rotors and brackets are the right size, choose a brake that comes just as the lever/body, hose and calliper rather than buying extra rotors and mounts you don't need.

When it comes to buying new brakes, make sure they solve the problems with your old ones. Try as many different models on the trail (pester your mates) before buying to see how different they can feel and narrow down what you like. If you don't like the lever feel or positioning of your current brakes, it might be worth investing in a set with bite point adjustment or cam style leverage changes. Read our reviews to check



that these features live up to their promise though, because some are more ornamental than useful.

If your current stoppers feel wooden or lack fine control, look for brakes that get praised for excellent modulation. If you want more power, check out our dynometer readings. If you want to shed grams, have a look at the weights on our scales – you might be surprised at the difference to the manufacturer's figure. (NB: All brakes have been weighed, priced and tested with 180mm rotors and full post mount kit.) Remember that using a 160mm rather than 180mm front rotor can save up to 50g in bracket and rotor weight, though you will lose a little power.

If you want a brake that's easy to look after at home, then check our long-term reliability reports, how easy they are to set up in the first place or bleed and service later down the line. Think about pads too – thankfully, many budget brake manufacturers are now smart enough to make their stoppers work with widely available Shimano or Avid pads. It's still something that's worth checking if you travel a lot with your bike though. »

MBUK Ratings

WE BASE OUR SCORES ON VALUE FOR MONEY AND PERFORMANCE

★★★★★ **EXCEPTIONAL:** A genuine class leader

★★★★☆ **VERY GOOD:** One of the best you can buy

★★★☆☆ **GOOD:** It'll do the job and do it well

★★☆☆☆ **BELOW AVERAGE:** Flawed in some way

★☆☆☆☆ **POOR:** Simply put, don't bother!



THE TESTER

Guy Kesteven
Our Kes has been using disc brakes on his bikes since the original Pro Stop and Hope mechanical designs over 20 years ago and he's still testing more sets than anyone else in the world.

HOW WE TESTED THEM

WITH SEVEN OUT of our 15 test brakes being new for this year, we needed the most in-depth and intensive testing protocol possible. That started with testing fresh examples of every brake on a specially designed dynometer. This gave us the exact same bedding-in process for every brake and an averaged power reading in metres per second of deceleration (m/s^{-2}) for the same hydraulically applied 50Nm lever pull. It also gave info on consistency and heat tolerance.

We then put all the brakes on a relentless ride-testing cycle with a wide variety of testers everywhere from the scorching south of France to the sodden trails of Yorkshire and the Lake District. We hung them upside down, chucked them on to uplift trucks, crashed them, power washed them, chopped and refitted hoses, bled them and replaced pads. In other words, we did everything you will with them, but in controlled comparison, to give the most accurate, reliable results possible. After investing that much time in testing, we don't mince our words when it comes to saying which ones are worth your money.



JARGON BUSTER

> **Ambidextrous:** Symmetrically designed brake that can be used on either side of the bar just by turning it over.

> **Banjo:** Metal end of the brake hose where it joins the calliper. Sometimes angle adjustable.

> **Bleeding:** The process of chasing air bubbles out of a hydraulic brake system to create a consistently solid feeling connection between the lever and rotor.

> **DOT fluid:** Synthetic hydraulic fluid designed to cope with very high temperatures.

> **Dynometer:** In this case, a converted lathe that spins the rotor at a fixed speed and torque, linked to a computer that records stopping force when a hydraulic ram presses the brake lever at 50Nm.

> **Finned pads:** Brake pads with fins added to increase surface area for improved heat dissipation.

> **Mineral oil:** Organic hydraulic fluid that's less heat tolerant but more eco friendly than DOT fluid.

> **Resin pads:** Softer organic material pads that are quieter and produce less heat than sintered pads but don't last as long and can glaze at high temperatures.

> **Single-bolt clamp:** Hinged or split handlebar clamp secured with a single bolt.

> **Sintered pads:** These pads contain metal shavings to increase wear life and stop harder, but this can create more heat and noise.

> **Split pin:** Simple looped metal piece used to hold pads in place.

> **Two-bolt clamp:** Handlebar clamp that uses a separate clamp section secured by two bolts.



FSA Afterburner

£170.85 Windwave **www.windwave.co.uk**

FSA ARE NEW to brakes but have released two for this season – the uber-expensive K-Force and the more affordable Afterburner here. The squat, angular body means it's an impressively solid feeling brake. Reach and bite point dials are built in, but like most contact point adjusters, the latter doesn't make much difference. The cam assisted 'Quick Draw' actuation means fast initial contact and the braking feel is firm and immediate rather than soft and squeezy. Actual stopping power is relatively weak though. While the brake price is average the separately supplied rotors (£13) and brackets (£8) are great value whatever brakes you're running. Because it's brand new we've no long-term feedback on the Afterburner, but we've had no trouble in the past few months.

MBUK ★★½☆☆



SRAM DB5

£125 Fisher Outdoor Leisure **www.fisheroutdoor.co.uk**

SRAM'S NEW AFFORDABLE DB5 is actually a mix of the DirectLink lever and body of their entry-level Guide R brake and the twin-piston calliper of the old Avid Elixir. The hinged clamp gives all the usual Matchmaker (SRAM's integrated control mounting system) shifter and fork/shock/seatpost remote syncing potential. There's no tool-free reach adjuster knob on the lever though and modulation is adequate rather than amazing. The twin-piston calliper drops power significantly lower than the four-piston Elixir Trail and Guide brakes. The unique power-boosting lever swing geometry compensates slightly but a 180mm rotor is still recommended for aggressive riding. The fixed hose exit means an awkward fit on some bikes and it's relatively heavy too.

MBUK ★★½☆☆



Magura MT5

£124.99 Zyro **www.zyro.co.uk**

MAGURA'S LATEST BRAKES are the most powerful we've ever tested, but not the most user friendly. The new four-piston callipers with a single mini pad for each piston are the only ones to have ever completely stopped our test dyno. The price-for-power ratio is also good, as long as you need the supplied rotor and bracket (the lack of separate options is irritating). Flex in the resin 'Carbotecture' lever body, blunt power delivery and extra power as it heats up mean the MT5 needs treating with respect in slippery conditions. The hose needs trimming before fitting (thankfully bleeding is easy) and the pads take several rides to stop screaming. The new lever and calliper design will hopefully improve on previously poor Magura reliability but the reservoir lid has already proved vulnerable to crash damage.

MBUK ★★★☆☆



Avid Code R

£160 Fisher Outdoor Leisure **www.fisheroutdoor.co.uk**

THIS COMBINATION OF Avid's last-generation Elixir lever and four-piston Code calliper has been around for a while but it's got plenty of loyal fans. The simple lever is more reliable than some Elixir offerings if it's hanging around on uplift trailers, etc, and the hidden hose mount on the big calliper is impressively robust. The body syncs neatly with SRAM shifters and shock/fork/seatpost remotes too. Power isn't massive but it's progressive and easily controlled through the natural-feeling lever sweep so it works well in slippery UK conditions. Pairing it with the new Centerline rotor reduces noise compared to older Avid rotors, but it also comes as a separate brake for £110. Reliability is generally good but stock up with pads if you're going on a roadtrip – they can be hard to find.

MBUK ★★★☆☆

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SRAM Guide R

£150 Fisher Outdoor Leisure **www.fisheroutdoor.co.uk**

SRAM'S CHEAPEST GUIDE brake is enduro ready but not as subtly controlled as its more expensive brothers. The main difference is the simpler DirectLink rather than SwingLink lever cam. The lever also sits on a bushing rather than a cartridge bearing. This means less fine control than the super-rich modulation of the Guide RS and RSC but it's still a consistently controlled stopper. Increased reservoir volume and internal redesign means easier bleeding and better tolerance of any air that does get in. It also feels more consistent than previous Avids as heat builds on descents. The Centerline rotor is quieter and the four-piston Elixir Trail calliper gives useful power. At £100 for just the brake pricing is OK, but the RS is worth the extra £15 if you've got it.

MBUK ★★★☆☆



Formula T1 Racing

£288.95 Silverfish **www.silverfish-uk.com**

FORMULA'S MOST POWERFUL brake gets an enduro makeover, providing excellent power-to-weight performance for those who can afford it. The Italian company's stoppers have always had a distinctive soft squeeze feel, but modulation is excellent in sketchy conditions. You need to treat the serious amount of power with respect though, especially as it comes on very early in the stroke (which won't suit riders who like their stopping to start with the lever almost at the grip). Wider pad retraction gives acceptable clearance but accurate set-up is crucial and they can squeal violently if dirty. Bleeding needs patience and the tiny alloy clamp bolts need care too but they contribute to an XC lever weight for the DH strength performance. That does come at a massive price though.

MBUK ★★★½☆



Hope Race Evo X2

£212.50 Hope Technology **www.hopetech.com**

HOPE'S LIGHTEST BRAKE is a proper flyweight unit, but still delivers a useful amount of power. Beautifully machined in their Lancashire factory, the drilled lever, open-diamond bar clamp, minimalist reservoir body and one-piece calliper remove as much weight as possible. The 160mm and 140mm alloy-centre floating rotors use a thinner gauge breaking surface and they come with titanium bolts as standard to lose a few more grams too. Power is good on the dyno, but the lever seems to need more of a squeeze than most on the trail. The feel is firm and direct rather than richly modulated like Hope's four-piston brakes and it can be noisy too. The price is high but reliability generally excellent, and Hope's factory-direct and big event back-up is legendary.

MBUK ★★★½☆

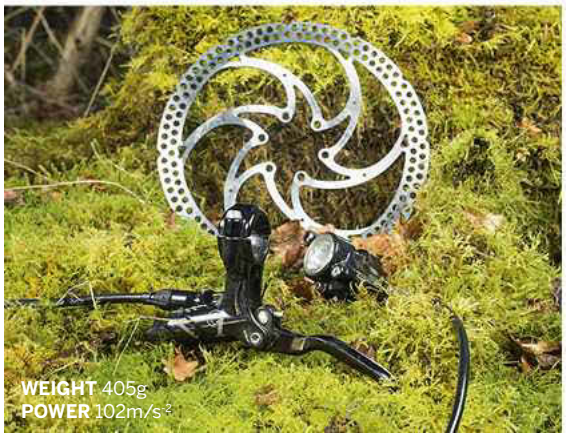


Formula C1

£138.95 Silverfish **www.silverfish-uk.com**

FORMULA'S MOST AFFORDABLE brake uses a unique cartridge design to keep weight impressively low but still delivers typically smooth, easily squeezed and predictably progressive control that you'll really appreciate in the wet. The extended reservoir design syncs easily with shifters and remote levers too. The minimal lever reach adjustment suits small hands. Increased pad clearance means it's easier to set up than previous Formula brakes, but the pads still scream if alignment isn't bang on. Power is reasonable but doesn't feel as pokey on the trail as the dyno numbers suggest. Steel hardware is more robust than the super-light alloy parts on posher Formulas and there are black or white painted options. We've had no trouble with our long-term sets.

MBUK ★★★½☆





Hope Tech 3 E4

£202.50 Hope Technology **www.hopetech.com**

HOPE'S EXTRA-MODULATION four-piston calliper meets their extra-adjustable Tech 3 lever to build a subtle all-round stopper. The Tech 3 lever is beautifully carved from alloy billet, then laser etched and assembled in Hope's UK factory. The result is a distinctively angular/mechanical look compared to smooth-cast competitors. Big external knobs give wide adjustment of both bite point and reach for perfect front/rear balance. The big reservoir gives plenty of heat capacity for big-mountain work, while the long, drilled lever adds extra mechanical leverage to the already usefully powerful four-piston brake. Various hose, colour and rotor options are available. Value is boosted by excellent reliability and Hope back-up.

MBUK ★★★½☆



Shimano Saint M820

£206.97 Madison **www.madison.co.uk**

SHIMANO'S MIGHTY SAINT comes marching in with massive power, single-finger control and excellent reliability but some details disappoint. The small, hooked lever drives through a Servo Wave cam that brings the brake to bite point quickly before increasing power. Add the four-piston calliper with its long pads and it's one of the most powerful brakes around. Once you're used to the cam feel and sheer stopping performance it's beautifully modulated too, so you can single-finger through the sketchiest conditions. The finned pads dump heat effectively on long descents, reliability is excellent and they're easy to bleed too. But the bite point dial is ineffectual, the optional finned Freeza rotors only fit Center Lock splined hubs and Shimano's own Zee brake is far better value.

MBUK ★★★½☆



Shimano XTR Trail M9020

£228.97 Madison **www.madison.co.uk**

SHIMANO'S NEW XTR brakes get subtle upgrades to improve already outstanding performance but some niggles remain. A new cam coating on the Trail model gives increased power over the Race version and the carbon-over-alloy lever is tougher too. It's still an impressively light system thanks to details like titanium bolts. Single-finger modulation is fantastically rich and communicative, and the pads and pistons get a new coating for higher heat tolerance. Bleeding is easy and reliability is excellent. It's compatible with Shimano's I-Spec II shifter mounts and the lack of orange anodising (as found on the old XTR Trail) makes it easier to colour match. The bite point dial still isn't great though, and the flan-fringed Freeza rotors are only available in Center Lock format.

MBUK ★★★★☆



Shimano Zee

£131.97 Madison **www.madison.co.uk**

SAINT'S CHEAPER DISCIPLE is a huge power, big bargain winner for gravity riders with thinner wallets. The dimpled 'Shorty' lever with Servo Wave cam action and I-Spec shifter syncing has obvious similarities to Saint. You don't pay for the largely ineffective bite point adjustment of its posher pal though. Essentially the same four-piston calliper with internal-edge banjo placement and different sized pistons means vast amounts of power so it needs respect at first. The smoothly squeezed modulation is fantastic though, and the lack of braking effort keeps fingers and forearms fresher on long descents. Reliability is excellent, one-way bleeding is easy and you can upgrade with Ice Tech pads and steel/alloy sandwich rotors for big-mountain heat management.

MBUK ★★★★½

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MBUK

WRECKED & RATED Group Test

WINNERS

Tester says...



"With the highest scores going to the cheapest brakes here, you don't need to spend a fortune to get reliable stopping control. Hope and Shimano prove some premium brakes are worth paying for though, and don't forget SRAM's Guide RSC, which scored 4.5 stars in issue 311."



Shimano SLX M675

£101.97 Ma dison **www.madison.co.uk**

SHIMANO'S OUTSTANDING SLX brake proves you don't need to spend a ton to get a top stopper. The lever/body layout is the same as the rest of Shimano's current crop, with a failsafe hinged single-bolt clamp that syncs with Shimano's I-Spec shifters. The short, broad, hooked lever feels great for single finger use and there's a reach adjuster knob on the knuckle. SLX lacks XT's bite adjustment, but that doesn't really work anyway so we've never missed it. Modulation and fine control in slippery conditions is excellent and the Servo Wave cam moves the pads quickly to the rotor for a keen but not snatchy feel. The twin-piston calliper has an outside-edge banjo mount and is moderately rather than massively powerful. That means we'd recommend Shimano's Zee for proper gravity use. Finned Ice Tech pads as standard means SLX doesn't overheat on big hills or under heavy-handed use though. Unlike many cheaper brakes the hose banjo can be swivelled for clean routing on all frames and easy bleeding plus included lever joint spares make SLX particularly suitable for internally routed frames where hose cutting is unavoidable. Weight is high but reliability is rock solid. As usual for Shimano, construction quality is excellent, both of the brake and the single-piece, two-part or Ice Tech rotors. The brake alone costs £69.99, making it a total bargain for all the trail brake you really need.

MBUK ★★★★½



Clarks M2

£22.50 Clarks **www.clarkscycles.com**

NO, THAT PRICE isn't a misprint and we've double and triple checked it's right with Clarks too. Can you really get a decent brake set (front and rear) complete with rotors and mounting hardware for £45? The simple answer is, 'yes'. Power is pretty feeble so you'll definitely need a 180mm rotor for aggro trail use or larger if you're planning to launch down a downhill course. Feel and feedback are less wooden than on a lot of more expensive brakes though, and we've had excellent long-term results with years' worth of Clarks brake use. The M2 comes with sintered pads as standard and takes Shimano spec replacements (even the finned ones) so sourcing spares is easy. The curved design and gold bore caps mean it doesn't even look cheap either.

MBUK ★★★★☆



Hope Tech 3 V4

£227.50 Hope Technology **www.hopetech.com**

HOPE'S BIGGEST BRAKE is a surefire super stopper, with excellent rider interfacing. The Tech 3 body gets a large-volume reservoir for long descent heat tolerance. The two-bolt clamp is Shimano I-Spec shifter compatible too. The long, drilled lever adds extra practical power to the already very pokey, long pad, four-piston calliper. Modulation is clean and clear, and overall control is boosted by simple and effective reach and bite point dials. The meticulously CNC machined brake is £175 on its own but there are various rotor options including twin-skin vented for really heavy-duty use. High cost and weight are potential issues but the reinforced braided metal hose and inside-edge banjo attachment make it an outstandingly bombproof brake and Hope's back-up is fantastic.

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MBUK Manual

THE SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE & PLACES TO GO FOR A BETTER RIDE



P136 HOW TO...

LOSE YOUR LOVE HANDLES

How to use your bike to get into shape – and still have tons of fun to boot!



P142 GRIMETIME

How to adjust your contact points – saddle, handlebar, brake levers and shifters



P144 ASK MBUK

Your questions, our answers, all your mechanical problems solved



P152 WRECKING CREW

BIKEPARK WALES: REVISITED

With two new trails added to the mix, the UK's only full-scale bike park is even more worth a visit



P146 THE BIG RIDE

Torridon, Scotland – definitely one to add to your bucket list. Plus free pull-out maps!

MBUK'S ROUTE EXPERT



All our route maps are put together by route guru **Max Darkins**. Max loves travelling the country in search of the best trails and is also the man behind **www.roughride guide.co.uk**

LOSE YOUR LOVE HANDLES

THE PERFECT EXCUSE TO GET OUT ON YOUR BIKE MORE – IT'S GETTING YOU FITTER, WHILE YOU'RE STILL HAVING TONS OF FUN

The humble mountain bike serves many a purpose. It's there for the thrills and spills of hitting the trails, is a great mode of transport and is marvellous at keeping you in shape, maybe without even realising it.

After a long, dark winter when the cold and lack of light messes with your motivation, ideal summertime routines are long forgotten. If you want to get ahead of your mates before a new season of shredding, read on for GT Factory Racing coach Alan Milway's top ways of getting more out of your riding and getting into shape while you're at it! »

Words Alan Milway **Pics** Various



WHO IS ALAN MILWAY?

Alan is the current coach for GT Factory Racing, along with several other DH and motocross pros. He's coached Danny Hart, Rachel Atherton, Manon Carpenter and Gee Atherton to World Championship titles and has been working with professional athletes for 10 years.

QUICK FIT FACTS #1

Riding on an empty stomach burns fat faster – but make sure to fuel up for strength work

CHANGE YOUR RIDING HABITS

QUICK FIT FACTS #2

Booze is calorific, makes you pee out water and electrolytes, and suppresses the immune system



1. BOOST YOUR RIDE LENGTHS

We all have a favourite 'loop' and it's pretty easy to stick to that route every time you head out for a ride, doing it on repeat. While that's a great thing to be doing in the first place, you're missing out on something called volume progression – basically, increasing the duration/distance of your ride from, say, 60 minutes to 90 minutes, to cause an increase in workload that stimulates physical developments. So think about how you can extend your favourite loop slightly. Progressively adding just a couple of miles will give you big improvements in all the right departments.

QUICK FIT FACTS #3

A high-fat diet can lead to problems sleeping, which affects performance on the bike



2. CHALLENGE YOURSELF

At Atherton Racing we have stretches of road and trails that Gee and Dan have set benchmark times on, so they know how long it should take them every time they go out and ride. The challenge I set them is that each time we ride these sections we go as hard as we can to try and break the times! Even if it's one only section in the ride, set a section where effort has to be stepped up. This increases the metabolic demand of the ride and is a great way to see improvements.



3. THE DREADED 'S' WORD

Strava. There, I said it. I've used Strava – loved it, hated it, been fascinated by it and spent numerous afternoons on my road bike riding as hard as I could to try to take all the local KOMs. It was then that I realised that if you pick and choose your times to use it, and forget about the fact that you're 135th on a stage you didn't realise you were even riding, then it can set up a good training ride focus.



4. GET YOUR RACE HEAD ON

If you regularly head out with a group of riders, or even just a couple of mates, try including some mini races within your rides. Last one to the top buys the beers! (Not too many though – you're supposed to be getting in shape...) This shouldn't change the fun aspect of the ride – in fact, it should add to it. A mix of short, sharp sprints and longer drags will show who's the powerhouse and who's the whippet! It's all good fun but genuinely builds fitness and motivation and can add to the social element of a ride.



QUICK FIT FACTS #4

Building up your strength lets you ride with less effort and reduces the risk of injury

5. NASTY HILL SPRINTS

It might sound like we're just trying to make your life miserable here but, seriously, we're not! Deliberately put the hardest climbs you can into a ride, and make them a regular challenge. Preferably hit them as hard and fast as possible, and allow good recovery time when you've conquered the hill.

OFF THE BIKE TIPS

If you want to improve your riding, then general conditioning and strength training will really make a difference.



LUNGING STRETCHES

Cyclists' hip flexors are prone to getting short and weak, which can affect the lower back and lead to soreness and pain. Stretching and strengthening these muscles with leg raises and lunging stretches will help reduce any pain and make your rides more enjoyable.



THIGH STRETCHES

It's important to really stretch out those hamstrings, not just before a ride but on a regular basis. As riders, we need to pay attention to these muscle groups to help avoid potential areas of limitation. All you need to do is a few stretches in front of the telly to really notice a difference.



UPPER BODY STRENGTH

If you struggle on rough ground or long descents, could it be due to a weak upper body? Can you do a chin-up or 20 press-ups? Increasing muscle is very useful – you're unlikely to bulk up or 'get sluggish' but more likely to reduce body fat, become more powerful and win every sprint!

QUICK FIT FACTS #5

Stretching improves your flexibility and posture and keeps aches and pains at bay



6. TWO BIRDS, ONE STONE

Riding to work is one of the best ways to get in some serious bike time without even thinking about it. I recently fitness-tested a 40-year-old triathlete who was in amazing shape. He based the vast majority of his training around his commute to work, which was eight miles in each direction. It shows it's possible to get into good shape even with a busy life! You could try riding to work once a week, riding into work and taking the train home, or driving halfway and riding the rest – whatever works best for you!

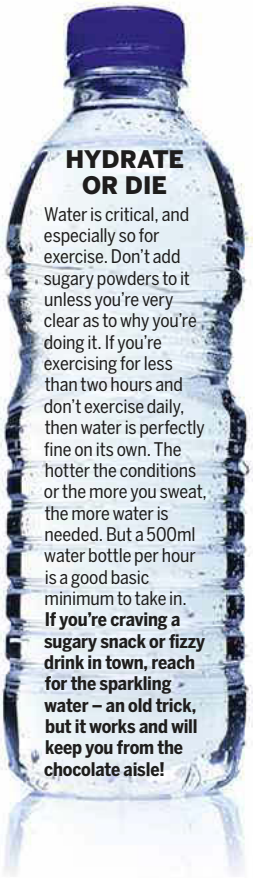
7. TYRE CHANGES

If you regularly ride your mountain bike to work, especially if the route is mostly on tarmac roads or cycle paths, is the bike set up as well as it could be? Think about the basics – saddle height, suspension lockout, tyre pressures and even tyres. A pair of slicks can turn a chore of a hill into a breeze – or if you're after the burn, try using under-inflated knobbly tyres. This is only good if you want some extra resistance training though!

8. HUNTING ROADIES

This isn't about being rude to our slick-tyred brethren, but using them as a benchmark or target to base your efforts on! If you normally ride at a steady plod on your daily commute, try upping the intensity for parts of the ride. If you see a cyclist up ahead, can you catch them? If they're riding at a good pace, can you sit on their rear wheel? I used to take a BMX race bike into the big smoke of Birmingham and try to sprint past anyone I saw – the look on their faces was worth the massive effort! And my sprint and anaerobic power crept up quickly over only a few weeks.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT



HYDRATE OR DIE

Water is critical, and especially so for exercise. Don't add sugary powders to it unless you're very clear as to why you're doing it. If you're exercising for less than two hours and don't exercise daily, then water is perfectly fine on its own. The hotter the conditions or the more you sweat, the more water is needed. But a 500ml water bottle per hour is a good basic minimum to take in. **If you're craving a sugary snack or fizzy drink in town, reach for the sparkling water – an old trick, but it works and will keep you from the chocolate aisle!**



CARBOHYDRATE

The body's main fuel source for moderate to hard efforts. Found in pasta, bread, potatoes and cereals, it's often given a bad rap by fad diet 'experts'. But it's only the processed, sugary carbohydrates (sugars) that spike blood sugar. The likes of wholemeal pasta and rice will fuel you well for a long day of riding. Cut back on carbs if needed, but don't cut them out or you won't be able to sustain long, hard rides.



PROTEIN

The body's repair and rebuilding blocks. Found in meat, fish, eggs, nuts, beans, etc. We need a good daily intake – how much will vary depending on exercise level. After exercise is the best time to take in protein, because it helps speed recovery and promote muscle repair and growth. If you're going to eat meat, make sure it's not processed, salted or pre-packaged. A 20g dose per meal is ideal for someone exercising.



FATS

Cutting back on processed foods high in saturated fats is a simple way of improving your lifestyle and losing body fat. But don't cut out all fat – it's our most energy-dense form of fuel and is vital for prolonged exercise. The unsaturated fat found in nuts, olive oil and fish is very beneficial. As a basic rule, if the fat is liquid at room temperature it's an unsaturated vegetable fat. If it's solid, it's from an animal and is saturated.

FAT STRIPPING

If your main aim is to lose fat, try following these basic rules



Eat less, exercise more

If you do very little exercise and your diet contains a lot of processed or sugary foods, cutting back on your food intake and increasing your exercise time will make a huge difference. Duration of exercise will make a bigger difference than intensity.



Leave breakfast till later

If you exercise regularly and want to target fat burning, think about meal times and what you eat. Riding to work on an empty stomach will actually drive the use of fat as a fuel. Eating breakfast after you arrive and including protein to make you feel fuller for longer will help massively.



Go slow – or fast!

Traditional fat-burning sessions are 'low and slow' – long duration but low intensity efforts at an easy pace. As part of a structured training plan, this is very valid. But if you don't do this sort of training frequently enough, for long enough and don't follow it up with other exercise, changing to higher intensity efforts will pay dividends. Mix short bursts of high effort with periods of recovery. You'll burn more calories, prime the body to prepare for exercise better next time and improve performance, as well as helping to lose the belly!

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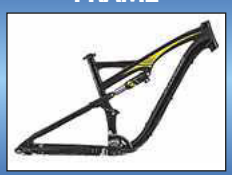
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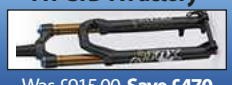
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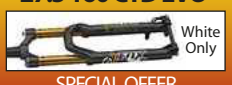
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1 SADDLE ANGLE



01 If the nose of your saddle is angled too far up or down you'll waste energy constantly trying to correct your body position. It should be sat roughly horizontal (parallel to the floor – use a spirit level for extra accuracy), though if you spend a lot of time climbing, tipping the nose down slightly can improve comfort and your position on the bike. If you need to change the angle, first note where the saddle rails are clamped by the seatpost.



OR



02a If your seatpost has a single-bolt saddle clamp, use the appropriately sized Allen or Torx key to turn the bolt anticlockwise until it's loose enough that you can adjust the saddle angle. Tilt the saddle to your required angle, being careful to maintain the same clamp position on the saddle rails. Retighten the bolt to the manufacturer's specified torque setting.

02b If your seatpost has a twin-bolt saddle clamp, loosen both bolts until you can move the saddle. Tilt it to your required angle, being careful to maintain the same clamp position on the saddle rails. Tighten the front bolt by turning it clockwise, stopping before the saddle angle starts to alter. Then tighten the rear bolt, ensuring the saddle remains in the correct position, until you reach the recommended torque setting.

WORKSHOP WISDOM

Adjusting your bike's contact points can make a huge difference to your ride, and it's worth experimenting to see how different set-ups can feel.

You can go further than we have here by fitting a bar with a different rise or sweep, a longer or shorter stem, swapping out saddles, and so on. But you should be able to achieve a pretty good set-up that'll improve comfort and control without spending a single penny.

As so much of this comes down to personal preference, take your time when making adjustments, only altering one thing at a time and taking note of the effect. If you're after some specific advice or need some help, go and chat to an expert in your local bike shop.

4 BAR POSITION





01 Bar width comes down to personal preference, but too narrow and your high-speed control will be compromised, and too wide and you'll feel stretched out and uncomfortable. If you have lock-on grips, you can experiment by moving them inwards to see how a narrower bar would feel. If you decide to cut the bar down, remember to 'measure twice, cut once'.

02 Rolling the bar can make a big difference to how your cockpit feels and dramatically affect your riding position. Use an Allen key to loosen the stem's bar clamp bolts, turning them just enough so you can rotate the bar (if you have a carbon bar, undo the bolts fully). Sit on the saddle and roll the bar forwards and backwards to find the best position. Tighten the bolts to the correct torque.



Tools for the job Essential kit

1 Spirit level
2 Allen key set
3 Torx key set
4 Grease
5 Torque wrench and bits

2 SADDLE HEIGHT



01 Saddle height is very important – even 1-2mm can make a big difference to your pedalling efficiency and comfort. Loosen the seat collar (the clamp at the top of the seat tube) by turning the Allen bolt anticlockwise or flipping out the quick-release lever and turning it anticlockwise. Adjust your saddle to roughly the right height, then tighten the bolt/QR. If you have a dropper post, check it's fully extended.



02 Sit on the saddle and rotate the cranks so one foot is in the 12 o'clock position and one at 6 o'clock. With your saddle at the correct height, you should be able to rest your heel on the lower pedal with your leg almost straight. This means when you clip in – or on flat pedals, when the ball of your foot is over the pedal axle – your knee should be slightly bent. Raise or lower your seatpost until you achieve this.

3 BAR HEIGHT



01 A higher bar helps create a more relaxed, sat-up position on the bike. This is great for steep downhill trails because it pushes your body weight further back on the bike, but it can leave you fighting for front wheel grip on flatter tracks and climbs. Getting bar height right takes time so it's worth trying a variety of positions. You can get bars with different rises, but for starters try experimenting with the spacers above and below your stem.



02 Insert a 5mm Allen key into the stem's top cap bolt and turn it anticlockwise to loosen and remove the bolt and top cap. Then use a 4 or 5mm Allen key to loosen both of the stem's steerer clamp bolts, again turning them anticlockwise. Remove any spacers above the stem, slip the stem off the steerer and then remove any spacers below the stem – leaving the top cup of the headset well alone.



03 The more spacers you place under the stem, the higher your bar will sit. Likewise, the more spacers you remove from below the stem and place on top of it, the lower your bar will sit. Reinstall the stem and spacers in the configuration you'd like to try, making sure there are the same total number of spacers on the steerer tube as before. We'd recommend only moving one spacer at a time.



04 Pop the stem's top cap and top cap bolt back in place. Turn the bolt clockwise – it's there to tension the headset bearings so only needs to be tight enough to remove play in the headset. To check for play, hold the upper headset assembly between thumb and forefinger and rock the bike back and forth. Straighten the stem so it's in line with the front wheel and tighten the steerer clamp bolts to the specified torque.

5 LEVER POSITION



01 Once you're happy with your bar position and height, it's time to adjust your brake levers and shifters. Use the appropriate Allen or Torx key to loosen all the clamp bolts so the levers and shifters can be moved easily along the bar. Sit on the saddle and hold the bar as if you were riding, leaning against a friend or a wall so you don't topple over. Stretch out your index fingers.



02 Move each lever so the crook at the end of the lever blade is under your index finger, then cinch up the clamp bolts. Now do the same with the shifters, ensuring they're easy to reach but don't get in the way. Once everything is in place, check all the bar clamp bolts are tightened to the manufacturer's specified torque settings.



03 Most brakes offer tool-free lever reach adjustment, and some have bite point adjustment too. Lever reach is the most important. You want the lever to be close enough to the bar so you can hook your index finger over it, but not so close that it touches your other fingers when you brake. Turn the dial to adjust the reach. If there's no dial, you'll need to use a 2 or 2.5mm Allen key.

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YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED BY OUR EXPERTS



After a stubby stem? Race Face's Respond is just the ticket

Q My Marin Wolf Ridge has served me well but I'm keen to try something new. I have £2,500 to spend and have narrowed my choice down to a Nukeproof Mega TR 275 Comp, Specialized Stumpjumper FSR Comp EVO 650b or YT Capra Comp. My requirements include a dropper post and 650b wheels, and it'll need to handle blasts around the Peak District and Lake District and laps of the Welsh trail centres.
Rick Huntington, via email



Nukeproof's Mega TR is bags of fun on the trail

A Three interesting choices there, Rick. While the Stumpjumper is a fun bike to ride, we don't think the 650b version feels as capable or planted as its 29in-wheeled counterpart so we'd give it a miss. The toss-up between the Mega TR and the Capra isn't easy though. The Capra leans more towards downhill performance, with slacker angles and more travel. It's in high demand, so can be hard to get hold of, and is only available in three sizes, the largest of which will suit riders around the 6ft mark. The Mega TR is a touch heavier but is more trail focused so could be just what you're looking for. With 130mm (5.1in) of nicely progressive travel, a solid spec and a hard-hitting frame, it should hold up well.

Q I have a 2013 Cube AMS 120 Pro 29 and I'm keen to replace the stock Easton EA30 stem with a shorter one (around 50mm) to help improve the bike's handling. Do you have any recommendations?
Neil White, via email

A There are loads of good stumpy stems out there at the minute so it really depends on what you're willing to pay. Race Face make some great little numbers at reasonable prices. Their Respond stem comes in 45mm or 60mm lengths and although it might not be the lightest, it's stiff and won't break the bank at £44.95. If you've a little more cash to spend, check out the Spank Oozy. It's light and stiff, and only a little more, at £59.99.

Q There's an endless number of winter shoes available for clipless pedals, but when it comes to mountain biking I prefer to use flats. I've yet to find any shoes that give me the winter protection of the Shimano MW80 SPD shoes I use for commuting and the grip of the AM41s I use the rest of the year. Am I missing something?
Martin Yardy, via email

A There simply aren't any flat pedal shoes that are as well insulated and weatherproof as your MW80 boots, we're afraid. In our experience, the Shimano AM41s are the best out there at standing up to wet weather. Your best bet is to invest in some decent merino wool or waterproof socks until the bike industry finally delivers a true winter-specific flat pedal shoe.

QUICK FIX MOUNTAIN BIKE TIPS

How to fit lock-on grips



01 Give the bare handlebar a good clean using a clean rag and some degreaser. Check for any damage. Serious gouges in the metal/carbon are a sign that it's time for a new bar.



02 Before you slot your grips on, make sure you've considered the final location of the lock-on collar bolts. Orientate the collars so that the bolts don't get in the way when you hold the grips but you can still access them.



03 With the grips in place and positioned correctly, tighten the lock-on collar bolts to the manufacturer's recommended torque setting. Give the grips a twist to ensure they're clamped firmly in place before hitting the trail.

CONTACT US: **Write to:** Ask *MBUK*, 9th Floor, Tower House, Fairfax Street, Bristol, BS1 3BN **Email:** askmbuk@bikeradar.com **Visit:** www.mbuk.com

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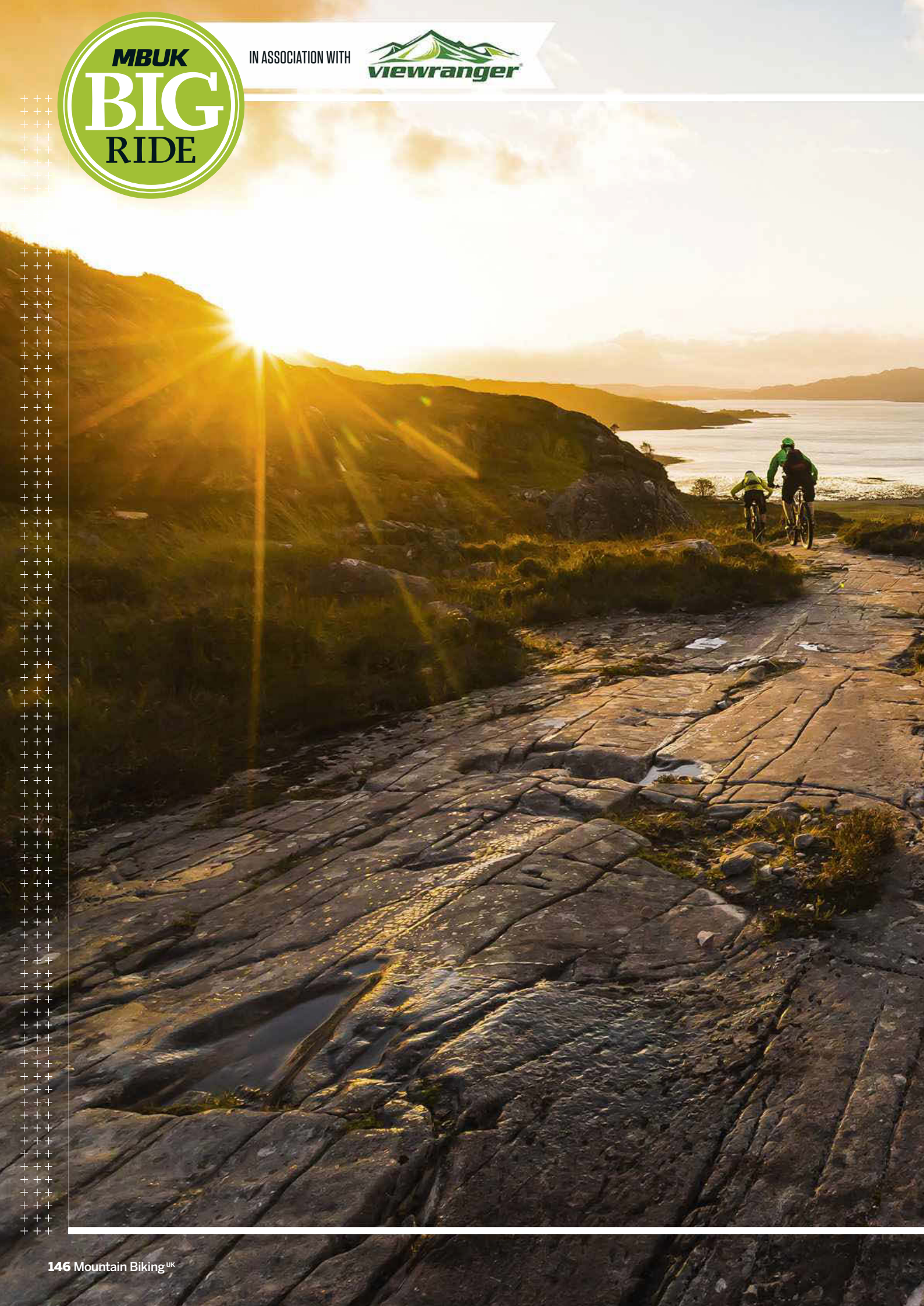
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MBUK BIG RIDE

IN ASSOCIATION WITH viewranger





TORRIDON, SCOTLAND

IF YOU'RE SEEKING ADVENTURE, THERE'S NO PLACE BETTER IN THE UK THAN DEEP IN THE HIGHLANDS

Words Max Darkins **Pics** Russell Burton

MBUK BIG RIDE

IN ASSOCIATION WITH viewranger



Whoa! Where's the trail gone?



No big ride is complete without some fast, rocky descents to blat down



Want to improve your balance and coordination? Try some river crossings



Crossing the border into Scotland, it feels as if we've broken the back of the driving, but we're heading to the Highlands so the journey is really only just beginning. We chase the sun for the rest of the day as it tries to hide behind the mountains, arriving in Torridon just in time to watch it dip below the horizon and cast the towering peaks around us into dark, looming shadows.

The next morning the terrain looks even more humbling as we admire it, respectfully, while scoffing down huge breakfasts. There's an easier option for the start of the ride – heading east on the road to Loch Clair, then south at Coulin Forest – but I've chosen the tougher, more fun route via the Coire Grannda pass, so after just a few hundred metres of tarmac, we're off-road and heading up our first incline of the day.

The climb out of Annat is a good challenge even for fresh legs and eager minds, but there's a long way to go and none of us can keep up the unrelenting effort required to keep moving onwards and upwards. It's not that much easier to walk and the technical challenge is too tempting, so we while away the time attempting to clear sections and soaking in the stunning 360-degree views as we stop to catch our breath – there's no way we'll take our eyes off the trail on the descent back down.

Rock hoppers

The trail eventually flattens out and we're met with another amazing sight – huge slabs of rock covered in a thin layer of water that mirrors the huge expanse of sky. We can't resist a little play, weaving between »

THE LOWDOWN

TORRIDON, WEST HIGHLANDS



This sparsely populated, mountainous region offers access to roam for mountain bikers, making it ideal for epic backcountry adventures.

www.visitscotland.com



THE ROCK IS UNBELIEVABLY GRIPPY, ENABLING US TO RIDE ALL MANNER OF IMPOSSIBLE LOOKING LINES AND GRADIENTS



You're never too far from a loch in these parts...

Community Route

Each month a member of the ViewRanger community shares their bonus route with you



Name: Steve Orr **From:** Inverness
Route: Kenmore to Applecross

This route follows well-defined singletrack from Kenmore to Applecross, with excellent views of Loch Torridon to begin with, and Raasay and the Cuillin at the end as you get to Applecross. The route is mostly ridable, with just one or two little sections where some may need to get off for a few minutes.



To get this great ride, just scan the QR code with your mobile device



WE'RE SOON RIPPING DOWN THIS FANTASTIC DESCENT, WHICH GETS STEEPER AND TIGHTER

the stones and boulders and testing the unbelievable grip, before we press on to the next section. We join a nice twisty bit of singletrack beside Loch an Eoin before it's back on to the rocks for a fun, steep, manmade rocky descent that drops us down to the head of a valley and a T-junction, which is pretty much the first choice of trail direction we've had all day.

Whales and volcanos

Unsurprisingly the route, bearing left, is uphill, with a fair amount of hike-a-bike required as we ascend Bealach Ban pass. At least we get to enjoy the views properly again. There are huge, smooth, rounded rocks, like stone humpback whales breaking through the Earth's crust, similar to the McMoab trail feature at Kirroughtree.

It's too tempting not to investigate further and we're rewarded by finding the rock is as grippy as before, enabling us to ride all manner of impossible looking lines and gradients. After we've tired ourselves out, we get that sinking feeling when we realise it's already lunchtime but we've barely covered a fraction of the planned route, which incidentally isn't blessed with any shortcut options.

To get on our way we have to shoulder our bikes once more, before remounting to drop down and skirt around Sgorr Ruadh where we join a blindingly bright white-stone trail. This leads us to an eerily flat area with rock faces on most sides, making it resemble a volcano crater. We stop for a bite to eat while eyeing up the way out – a scramble up some big rocks. Time is against us so we push on, with bikes on our backs again. The wind is being channelled down through the pass, making it extremely difficult and testing our fast disappearing patience, but once over the crest a rough, rocky descent down the Coire Lair is enough to rekindle our spirits.

After a while, lost in all the fun, I notice I'm alone, so I make my way back and find one of our party, ex *MBUK* staffer Ric McLaughlin, having a lie down. He peels back his top to reveal a nasty wound from an over-the-bars moment. Thankfully he's OK to continue, but it's a sobering thought that we're a long way from any help up here.

Luckily we've all got really bad memories and are soon ripping down the rest of this fantastic descent. It starts off fast and flowing with big grippy boulders to use as berms, then gets steeper and tighter with rocks and drops to keep you on your toes. Finally it picks up speed again along a section of dirt singletrack to finish by Achnashellach station. We all immediately agree this is the best natural trail we've ridden.

Panic stations

We're only halfway around our route though and it's nearly 4pm, so a mild panic sets in, especially as I don't want to ride down the final descent in the dark – or even worse, have to walk it. The wind is roaring down the valley so we form a mini peloton to smash out the road section as fast as possible, and we're soon back off-road and heading up the valley.

The track beside Fionn-abhainn is good and, more importantly, sheltered, so we're able to cover the ground quickly, slowly gaining height



TESTING TERRAIN
On a route like this you need to be prepared for everything from rock to bog

as we chase the sun, which once again tries its best to hide behind the hills. At Loch Coire Fionnaraich the trail leads into the water. Being tight for time we just head into it, hoping the loch doesn't have steep edges. Happily we make it through with no more than wet feet, but then the trail kicks up sharply, reducing us to pedestrian mode at times, and our feet have never felt heavier. It's clear we're all suffering after our panic-paced riding for the past hour or so.

A slice of paradise

As we crest Bealach na Lice we're met with the magical sight of orange sunlight cutting through the evening mist over Loch an Eoin. I break out the last of the emergency food, some ever so fittingly named paradise cake, in celebration as we recover and watch the sun disappear behind the horizon.

Sugar and motivation levels restored, we set off again, racing across the flat plains, leaping off rocks and into the grand finale – the long descent to Annat. We couldn't have timed the finish any better, as the setting sun casts a golden hue over the loch and mountains for a magical end to the best ride I've ever experienced. If Torridon isn't on your riding bucket list, trust me, you need to add it now.



BEST EATING

The Torridon Inn, on the shores of Loch Torridon and with stunning views of the mountains, is the perfect place to finish this epic ride. It offers great Scottish pub and bistro food, with favourites such as haggis, neeps and tatties, as well as Isle of Ewe smoked salmon, mussels, venison, steaks, pies and burgers, all sourced locally where possible. There's a well stocked bar too, with a wide range of real ales and an even wider choice of whiskies, which you can sample to your heart's content because they also offer accommodation.
www.thetorridon.com/inn



Trail centres are great, but nothing beats a proper mountain epic

THE LOWDOWN

BIKEPARK WALES



DISTANCE: 0.2 TO 2.2KM PER DESCENT

CLIMBING: VERY LITTLE – UPLIFT OR 4.6KM SINGLETRACK CLIMB

TIME: AS LITTLE OR AS LONG AS YOU FANCY

GRADING: GREEN, BLUE, RED AND BLACK, PLUS 'PRO' LINES

WHY RIDE HERE?

If downhill fun is on your agenda, the trail bike friendly bike park has the UK's best selection of all-weather trails in one spot

RAD...

- So many trails to ride
- Awesome uplift service
- Upper park laps FTW

BAD...

- The climb from the bottom is a beast – especially after a Dragon Burger in the caff
- Jump trails can suffer from gusty wind



WRECKING CREW

Mountain Biking UK

BikePark Wales: Revisited

Offering gravity-fed trails for everyone, BPW has just added a new jump trail and an amazing black downhill run

Words Doddy **Pics** Russell Burton



'More haste, less speed' isn't a maxim *MBUK*'s Art Ed Jimmer tends to live by. As he hurtles down the new 50 Shades trail he attempts to manual a rock gap but tags his front wheel, sending him flying over the bars. Bouncing back to his feet like a kid after a triple espresso, he hops back on and carries on as if nothing happened – somehow after all these years he still has nine lives!

Jumping for joy

Since it opened in August 2013, BikePark Wales has done exactly what its four founders intended, attracting hordes of mountain bikers to Gethin Woods just outside Merthyr Tydfil to ride the UK's first full-scale bike park, complete with amazing uplift-accessed descents for all abilities. The project really is something special, with a great team pulling together to continually improve things.

Something that's been heavily requested since the park opened is a jump trail similar to Whistler's A-Line. Late last year BPW responded with the crafty A-470 Line – a blinding bit of trail that flows down the hill and is filled with berms, drops, tabletops and step-ups to give a true rollercoaster ride. The A-470 Line is a scream for the air merchants, but thanks to the way the trail crew built it, it also has mass appeal – it's an ideal place to improve your airborne skills. Today the wind is pretty gusty though, so after a few dead sailors we decide to quit while we're ahead.

Old favourites

The uplift vans and singletrack climb both deliver riders to the trailhead at the top of the hill, where clear signposting and a trail map make it easy to pick the right trails for your skill level. Some modifications have been made since the park opened, with safety features added such as the wooden gap jump at the start of the Dai Hard black run. If you can't complete these tester obstacles, you really shouldn't be on the trail, but while hanging around we watch plenty of riders walk around the obstacles and continue down the hill. Take note if you're doing this – if you hurt yourself riding a trail that's above your ability, you could spoil things for others.

But back on a positive note, there's a constant stream of riders disappearing off down the trails. Most of them seem to pick either the ridiculously fun Sixtapod blue trail or the »





There are plenty of alternative line choices on the black runs – if you're not going too fast to spot them!



The expression 'pinned or binned' was pretty much invented for Jimmer



Jimmer prepares to get up close and personal with some Welsh slate

The Wrecking Crew Who are we?



JAMES BLACKWELL
Five foot of trouble and energy, Art Ed Jimmer rides quick and talks quicker.



ANDREW DODD
MBUK's recently departed Features Ed, Doddy's on the ultimate trail quest.



JONNY ASHELFORD
Snapper, product tester and *MBUK*'s spanner-wielding workshop manager.



OLLY FORSTER
MBUK's Staff Writer loves nothing more than fast and challenging trails.



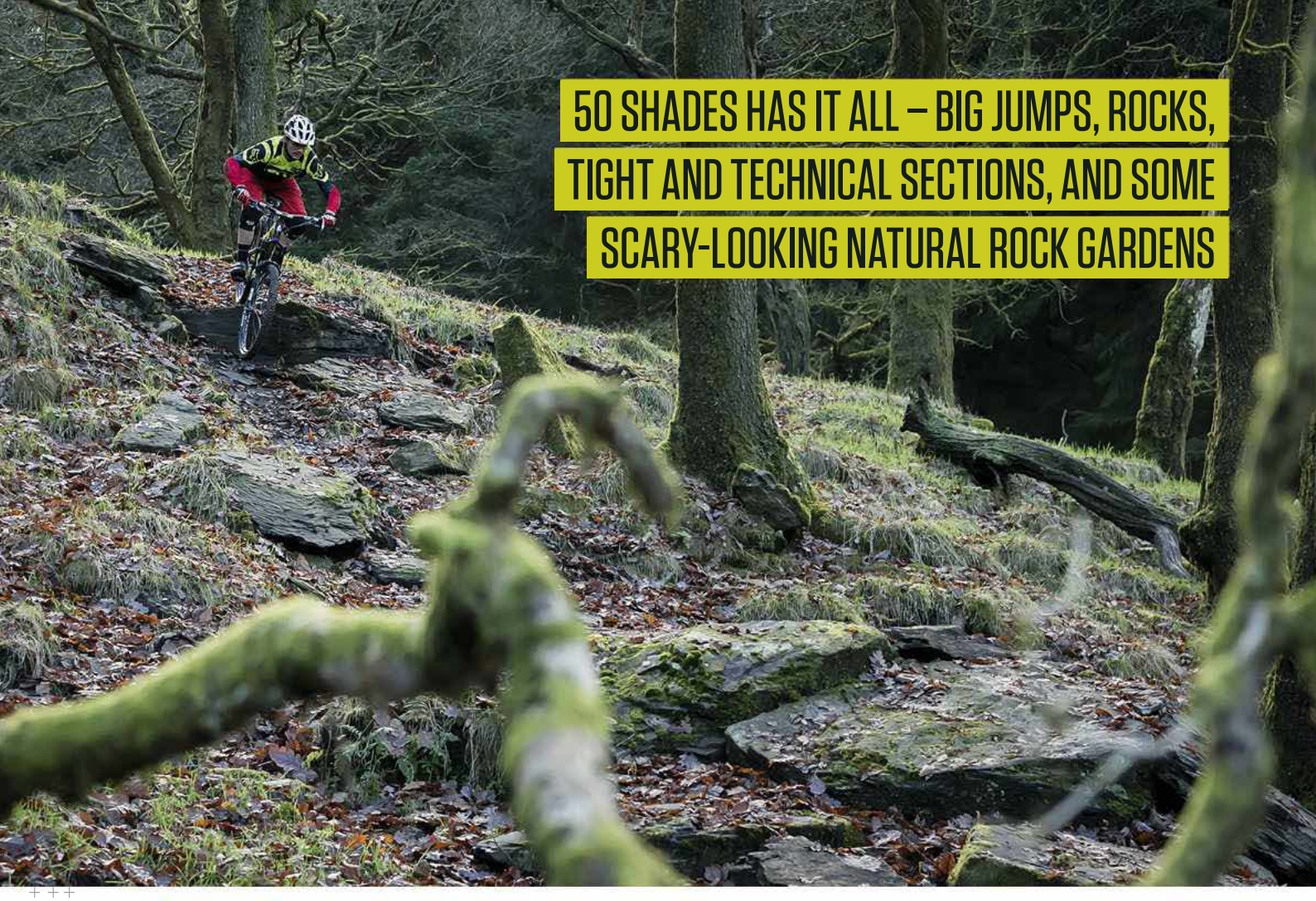
JOE HAYHOW
Bristol-based MTB photographer, shredder and gym monkey.



JOHN KORFIATIS
Editor of *MBike Greece* magazine – and a lifelong *MBUK* reader.



THE NEW A-470 LINE IS A BLINDING BIT OF TRAIL THAT FLOWS DOWN THE HILL TO GIVE A TRUE ROLLERCOASTER RIDE



50 SHADES HAS IT ALL – BIG JUMPS, ROCKS, TIGHT AND TECHNICAL SECTIONS, AND SOME SCARY-LOOKING NATURAL ROCK GARDENS

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

LOCALS DO...

- Take part in the dig days
- Session the upper park lots
- Make the most of season tickets

LOCALS DON'T

- Leave litter anywhere
- Push back up the trails
- Go slow, anywhere!

rougher Wibbly Wobbly red route. They're two of the best trails here, but *MBUK*'s firm favourite is Vicious Valley, the red trail that's accessed via the Melted Welly blue route. It has the perfect amount of flow and speed but retains enough technicality and hazards to elicit the odd yelp when you're batting on down the trail – sometimes in delight, and others in mild terror as you contort yourself around the tight trees at speed.

The trail crew at BPW are the heroes of the whole operation because they keep everything running brilliantly, whatever the weather. We've been to BPW a hell of a lot in the past year or so, and it staggers us that with such a huge flow of traffic on the trails, everything rides as well as it does. And if there are problem areas, the crew are on the case, pronto. As we spin back up the fireroad we spot them hard at it repairing a section of trail. As jolly as ever, they all wave at us.

Hard, fast and rocky

While the easier, flowing trails have been a big hit, some riders have been crying out for more technical, steep and varied terrain. Once more BPW's super-hardworking trail crew have obliged, with the creation of the new 50 Shades black trail, rumoured to have been inspired by BPW co-founder Rowan Sorrell's favourite book – though with less slap 'n' tickle and more roots 'n' rock. After a quick word with Jason – the world's happiest trail builder – we get to preview the lower section before it opens.

Definitely deserving of its black rating, and with plenty to challenge even riders on full-on downhill bikes, 50 Shades has it all – big jumps, rocks, tight and technical sections, and some scary-looking natural rock gardens. And it uses another part of the hillside, giving it a very different feel to the trails already in place.

As we're checking out the trail on foot, two friends of *MBUK* – Bristol photographer Joe Hayhow and his mate John Korfiatis, visiting from Greece – join us for a session on the new stuff. John quickly gets to work hitting a road gap, and encourages Olly to send it off the gap too. First time up, Olly gets kicked up the arse a bit and has us all sucking air through our teeth, but he »



WRECKING CREW WISDOM

"It's definitely worth using the uplift service if you can, because you'll be able to get loads more runs in. It costs £32.50 per day (or £30 in the week) but that includes the £6 park entry fee. Be warned though, it's often booked up months in advance.

"If you can't book on the uplift, don't despair. You can ask at reception for a single-trip uplift card that lets you pay for up to five trips in advance (£4 each) and then slip on to the van when the queue is small. Alternatively, why not just ride up, either on the Beast of Burden climb or the fireroad?

"The key to keeping it fun is to spend the morning sessioning the top half of the hill, riding back up each time on the fireroad. Then, when hunger kicks in, hammer it to the bottom and treat yourself to some of the great food on offer in the cafe. After that, it's ride and repeat until your legs cave in!"

JIMMER *MBUK* ART EDITOR & POLECAT WRANGLER



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With its twisty, rooty singletrack, Vicious Valley has a natural feel



Olly nails the 50 Shades road gap, after nearly nailing himself on his first attempt



THE OVERSEAS VISITOR GIVES US HIS VIEW

"I recently visited the UK for a month of training, 4X racing and riding, and found myself at BikePark Wales twice, because the first time wasn't enough! My Intense Carbine 275 was an awesome tool for the job. I was lucky enough to have a preview ride of the new, gnarly 50 Shades trail and I can only describe BPW as a small MTB paradise. It has huge berms, awesome jumps that are safe enough for any kind of rider, enough roots and stones to satisfy every inch of your suspension, and a bike shop, restaurant and pump track at the bottom. The new track is natural, rocky and fast, and will blow your mind for sure! I can't wait to find myself riding there again."

JOHN KORFIATIS EDITOR, *MBIKE GREECE*

lands unscathed and emerges unshaken. We don't think he realises how close he was to an OTB! Nevertheless, he hits it again and sails the gap nicely, before blatting off down the trail with John whooping and hollering behind him.

Know the flow

So much thought is put into the trails at BPW that they all flow well. Even when techy they feel intuitive to ride, and 50 Shades is another stonker. It has steep loamy turns that flow into rocky straights, gap jumps and some serious rock features – including one that halts us in our tracks. Huge chunks of rock jut out the ground like uneven steps, with wheel-swallowing holes between them and a glossy, mossy sheen that makes us all nervous. The surface proves much grippier than we thought though, and one by one we monster truck our way over the rocks, with rims dinging, pedals clanging and suspension bottoming – it's one hell of a feature and will no doubt become a prime spot for some *You've Been Framed* action.

Further down, the trail gets better and better as it opens up and the speed increases. Gap jumps straight into berms and tight sections between stumps all try to catch you out before you're spat back out on the uplift road ready for another go.

Yet again, the trail crew have done a sterling job while keeping the rest of the park bang on point. Awesome job.

THE DIRECTORY

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT **BIKEPARK WALES**

GET THERE

BikePark Wales is located in Gethin Woodland Park, just off the A470 and a 15-minute drive from junction 32 of the M4. The postcode CF48 4TT will get you to the roundabout you need to turn off from. The nearest railway station is Pentre-Bach, a 15-minute ride away. A day's entry to the bike park costs £6.

CONTACT

BikePark Wales
www.bikeparkwales.com

FACILITIES

Parking, cafe, changing room, showers, toilets, bike wash, bike shop, bike hire, skills coaching

BIKE SHOPS

BikePark Wales has its own bike shop on site, complete with expert mechanics, Mojo suspension tuning and bike hire.

WHAT ELSE IS NEARBY?

Cwmcarn
Two great XC trails and uplift-accessed DH tracks.

Glyncorrwg
A fantastic trail hub in Afan Forest, with four challenging XC loops and a bike shop on site.

Forest of Dean
The Pedalabikeaway centre offers a mix of flowing manmade routes and rooty and rocky trails.

VERDICT

The driving force behind BikePark Wales was to create a thriving community of mountain bikers, and they've really achieved this – walking into the centre you see lots of happy, muddy faces and in the uplift bus you see the same grins on the faces of experts and novices alike as they share stories of their last run. The atmosphere here is as great as the riding.

★★★★★

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2013 GIANT ANTHEM X2

Alloy frame, Rockshox Monarch rear shock, Rockshox Reba RL fork, 30 Speed Shimano Deore gearing and disc brakes rrp £1700 now £979.99



2013 GIANT TRANCE X 29ER 2

Alloy suspension 29er frame, Rockshox Recon fork, Monarch rear shock, Sram 20 speed gearing, Shimano disc brakes. RRP £1500 NOW £1124.99



2013 CANNONDALE TRIGGER 29ER 3

Alloy frame, X Fusion rear shock, Rockshox Revelation fork, 20 Speed Shimano SLX/XT, Magura disc brakes rrp £2600 now £1249.99



2013 CANNONDALE TRAIL SL1

Rockshox Recon air fork, 30 speed Shimano Deore/XT gearing, Shimano Hydraulic disc brakes. RRP £1100 NOW £679.99



2014 GIANT ANTHEM 27.5 3

Alloy susp. frame, Rockshox forks and shock, 20 speed Shimano Deore/SLX gearing, Shimano disc brakes rrp £1500 now £1099.99



2014 CUBE LTD RACE 29

Alloy hardtail, Rockshox Reba RL Poploc fork, 30 spd Shimano SLX/XT grg, XT Hubs and Deore Hydraulic disc brakes rrp £1100 now £879.99



2014 SCOTT SCALE 735

Carbon frame, Rockshox XC30 Gold fork, 20 Speed Shimano Deore/XT gearing and brakes, Syncros finishing kit RRP £1800 now £1199.99



2014 MONGOOSE SALVO COMP 29

Full Susp. frame, X Fusion rear shock, Suntour fork, 27 spd Shimano Alivio gearing with Hayes hydraulic disc brakes rrp £1100 nw £659.99



2014 CANNONDALE TRAIL SL29 3

Alloy frame, Rockshox XC 30 fork, 27 spd Shimano Alivio/Deoe gearing, Shimano Hydraulic disc brakes 29er wheels rrp £900 nw £499.99



2013 CANNONDALE TRIGGER CRB 1

Hi Mod carbon frame, Carbon Lefty fork, Fox Dyad rear, 20 Spd Shimano XT/XTR, XTR Brakes, Reynolds Carbon wheels RRP £5500 now £2499.99



2014 CANNONDALE TANGO 29 5

Womens 29er hardtail, Suntour lock out forks, 27 speed Shimano Altus/ Acera gearing, Cannondale hydraulic disc brakes rrp £600 now £359.99



2014 GIANT XTC ADVANCED 27.5 2

Carbon frame, Fox 32 15mm fork, 20 Speed Shimano XT/XTR gearing, XT disc brakes, Giant wheels by DT Swiss rrp £2500 now £1799.99



2013 GIANT GLORY FRAME

8" travel Maestro alloy suspension frame, Rockshox Vivid R2C Air rear shock, 12mm axle rrp £2000 now £649.99



2014 CANNONDALE F29 5

Alloy frame 29er, Lefty PBR 90 fork, 20 Speed Shimano Deore/SLX grg, Shimano hydrc disc brakes, Stans wheel rims rrp £2000 now £1199.99



2013 GT KARAKORAM 2.0

alloy frame 29er, Rockshox XC28 fork, Shimano Alivio/Deore 27 speed gearing, Shimano hydraulic brakes rrp £700 now £399.99

GT

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ANTHEM X 29ER 3		NOW £1199.99
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XTC COMPOSITE 29ER 2	RRP £1700	NOW £1049.99
XTC ADVANCED SL 1	RRP £3500	NOW £2249.99
GLORY FRAME	RRP £2000	NOW £649.99
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TALON 29 2	RRP £600	NOW £449.99
TALON 29 1	RRP £900	NOW £699.99
XTC ADVANCED 27.5 4	RRP £1600	NOW £1199.99
XTC ADVANCED 27.5 3	RRP £1900	NOW £1449.99
XTC ADVANCED 27.5 2	RRP £2500	NOW £1799.99
ANTHEM 27.5 3	RRP £1500	NOW £1099.99
ANTHEM 27.5 2	RRP £1850	NOW £1299.99

mongoose

2014		
SWITCHBACK COMP	RRP £380	NOW £249.99
SALVO SPORT 29	RRP £900	NOW £539.99
SALVO COMP 29	RRP £1100	NOW £659.99

CUBE

2013		
AIM DISC		NOW £399.99
LTD		NOW £559.99
LTD PRO		NOW £659.99
2014		
ACCESS WLS	RRP £380	NOW £299.99
AMS HPA 29	RRP £1500	NOW £1199.99
LTD RACE	RRP £1100	NOW £879.99
REACTION GTC PRO 27.5	RRP £1400	NOW £1099.99
REACTION GTC PRO 29	RRP £1400	NOW £1099.99

cannondale

2012		
FLASH ALLOY 29ER 2		NOW £999.99
FLASH CARBON 1		NOW £1999.99
2013		
F26 CARBON 3	RRP £2500	NOW £1469.99
RZ120 XLR2	RRP £2500	NOW £1399.99
SCALPEL 29ER 4	RRP £2000	NOW £1199.99
SCALPEL 29ER CARBON 2	RRP £4500	NOW £2999.99
JEKYLL CARBON 2	RRP £4800	NOW £2399.99
TRIGGER CARBON 1	RRP £5500	NOW £2499.99
TRIGGER CARBON 2	RRP £3800	NOW £1749.99
TRAIL SL 1	RRP £1100	NOW £679.99
F29 1	RRP £2000	NOW £1229.99
F29 2	RRP £1800	NOW £1099.99
SCALPEL 29ER 1 CARBON	RRP £6000	NOW £3599.99
JEKYLL 3	RRP £3200	NOW £1599.99
TRIGGER 29ER 1	RRP £3600	NOW £1799.99
TRIGGER 29ER 2	RRP £3000	NOW £1499.99
TRIGGER 29ER 3	RRP £2600	NOW £1249.99
2014		
F29 BLACK INC	RRP £7800	NOW £4679.99
F29 CARBON 2	RRP £3500	NOW £1999.99
F29 CARBON 3	RRP £2900	NOW £1749.99
F29 ALLOY 4	RRP £2400	NOW £1439.99
F29 ALLOY 5	RRP £2000	NOW £1199.99
TRIGGER 29 4	RRP £2900	NOW £1599.99
TRAIL SL 29 1	RRP £1250	NOW £799.99
TRAIL SL 29 2	RRP £1100	NOW £629.99
TRAIL SL 29 3	RRP £900	NOW £499.99
TANGO 29 5	RRP £600	NOW £359.99
TANGO 29 6	RRP £500	NOW £309.99

SCOTT

2013		
SCALE 640	RRP £1700	NOW £899.99
SCALE 620	RRP £2500	NOW £1249.99
SCALE 600RC	RRP £5000	NOW £2199.99
2014		
SCALE 735	RRP £1800	NOW £1199.99
SCALE 720	RRP £2500	NOW £1549.99
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£267 deposit + 36 mtly payments of £62

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NEW 2015



OUR PRICE £3799
0% *Example £335 deposit + 36 payments of £74

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NEW 2015



OUR PRICE £2999
0% *Example £335 deposit + 36 payments of £74

Kona

PROCESS 153

OUR PRICE £2899
0% Option £307 deposit + 36mthly payments of £72

NEW 2015



Orange MOUNTAIN BIKES

CRUSH AM 27.5"

NEW 2015

OUR PRICE £1299
0% *Example £147 deposit + 24 monthly payments of £48

With Fox 32 forks £1369
0% *Example £145 deposit + 24 monthly payments of £51



2014 ALPINE 160 26"

ALPINE RS 26"
WAS £3599
NOW £3199
0% *Example £355 deposit + 36 monthly payments of £79

SALE

ALPINE AM 26"
WAS £2799
NOW £2249
0% *Example £223 deposit + 36 monthly payments of £56



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0% *Example £349 deposit + 36 payments of £79

2014



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0% Example *£183 Deposit + 24 payments of £63
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0% Example *£406 Deposit + 36 payments of £94

CANNONDALE JEKYLL 4

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OUR PRICE £2699
0% *Example £287 deposit + 36 payments of £67

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SALE 2014



WAS £2399 NOW £1999
0% Option £223 deposit + 24mthly payments of £74

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NEW 2015



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DUO

LIGHT WEIGHT • HEAVY DUTY

RENTHAL

photo : Laurence Crossman-Emms / rider : Neil Donoghue



Duo 40mm

Weight : 124g
Rise : 10 degrees
Offset : 40mm
Bar Clamp : 31.8mm



Duo 50mm

Weight : 143g
Rise : 10 degrees
Offset : 50mm
Bar Clamp : 31.8mm

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